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The Billy Mitchell court-martial of 1925.

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THE BILLY MITCHELL COURT-MARTIAL OF 1925

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of the requirements for a Degree of
Master of Arts

University of Massachusetts
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Harold J. Gordon Jr.

Wilton Center

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4 November 1964

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INTRODUCTION

9 On the morning of October 28, 1925, in a shabby structure known as the Emory Building, in Washington, D.C., a distinguished military leader and war hero faced a General Court-Martial on charges of insubordination. From that day until the 17th of December the eyes of the nation would be focused on the makeshift courtroom and on the colorful figure of the accused, Colonel William Mitchell, onetime Brigadier General and Assistant Chief of the Army Air Service. A skillful flier with an outstanding war record, Mitchell was also an unorthodox and extremely outspoken soldier. For years a center of controversy, he had criticized his superiors in terms so bitter that this climactic trial became inevitable.

The court-martial of Billy Mitchell has remained a controversial chapter in American history. Writers are no nearer agreement today in evaluating this episode than they were in 1925. By his partisans, Billy Mitchell is still described as a hero and a martyr, as many so regarded him at the time of the trial and before. To others he has always seemed a mountebank, an opinionated gadfly, a divisive force. Mitchell was granted a posthumous vindication when World War II substantiated many of his predictions, but in respect to his theories only. Whether or not he was right to speak and act as he did, whether he was really justified in the conduct that led to his court-martial, are still moot questions. They are questions that

might well be asked in connection with other military officers in later years. They are questions that lie at the heart of military relationships and concern the dichotomy of the individual's convictions versus official policy, dedication versus discipline, the man versus "the system".

" Strangely enough, it is not even agreed today whether Billy won or lost his fight. It is by no means certain whether he could have achieved his aims in any event. At this late date the question may even be raised, whether or not the whole sad Mitchell episode might have been a monstrous irrelevancy having no bearing one way or the other on the development of national defense. This possibility, suggested by one of Mitchell's staunchest supporters, General Henry H. Arnold¹, may well be close to the truth. If Billy Mitchell's ordeal was, in fact, irrelevant and unnecessary, it becomes a personal tragedy of the highest order, and deserves to be considered in that light. If, indeed, Billy was less a martyr than a suicide, then human values assume greater importance than military issues. If injustice was done, it may be traceable on the one hand to Billy's failure to reach a rapport with the military system of which he was a part, and on the other hand to failure of the system to understand the motivations of an unorthodox and highly articulate individual.

Billy Mitchell was neither the first nor the last high-ranking officer to be involved in a public disagreement with his

1

Arnold, Henry H., Global Mission, pp. 121-122.

superiors. The mercurial George Armstrong Custer had been disciplined and demoted for his outspoken views in the post-Civil War period. So had George Crook. Between 1939 and 1963 wrangles over military policy or weapons were common, and highly placed men like Admirals Arthur B. Radford and Hyman Rickover, Generals Douglas MacArthur and James M. Gavin engaged in public controversies which might easily have placed them uncomfortably close to Mitchell's position. The climate of the times was different, however, and the temper of these officers and their superiors possibly more moderate. Possibly, too, these officers were not quite as far "ahead of their times" as was Mitchell according to a time-worn cliché. The issue, however, has always boiled down to the same thing: individual judgment versus official policy. All cases have, in varying degrees, exemplified the terrible dilemma of the dedicated professional soldier who sees his views disregarded and his advice rejected. Where does his loyalty properly lie? To his service, which demands his unswerving obedience? Or to his country, which depends for its safety on the benefits of his training, experience and judgment? How far can he go in fighting for what he believes is right? At what point must he say "Yes, sir" and fall back into ranks, to support a policy he earnestly believes is wrong? Regardless of which course an officer elects to follow, the question remains - how is history to judge the rightness of his actions? Is the final criterion to be merely the validity of his views, or does this matter at all? Rather, should it be deemed that his personal honor alone is the standard by which he should be judged? This dilemma remained

unresolved by the 1925 court-martial, and persists in military and political relationships to the present day.

People elect a military career for a variety of reasons. Some see it as affording the opportunity for an active, venturesome life, away from civilian routine. Some, consciously or unconsciously, find in it a legal outlet for aggressive, combative tendencies. Many sooner or later recognize it as an orderly, ordered pattern of existence that relieves them of the necessity for personal decisions, where "the book" is the Gospel and the chain of command a philosophy of life. Some, like "Stonewall" Jackson, show a remarkable adeptness in using the system as a ladder to greatness, others shrewdly use it as a shield to cover their own inadequacies and under this aegis achieve the appearance of greatness. Official policy, as reflected in military regulations and in the programs of our service academies, has abetted this approach. The very rigidity of a regulated life can be considered at its best as insuring standardization and discipline, at its worst as producing stultified thinking and setting a premium on mediocrity.

At the other end of the spectrum from the "book" officers is a totally different breed of professional military men. These are men who are fascinated by some particular phase of military operations or some particular weapon, sufficiently so to make a life's work out of becoming an expert in their chosen field. They are the technicians, the specialists, and the mechanization of warfare has brought them into their own. They are the spiritual heirs of the bowmen and cavalrymen of years past. The "book" holds no magic for them, they scorn entrenched procedures, generally

abhor protocol. Their chief limitation derives from their very dedication to the weapon or service in which they are so expert. Their loyalty, like their knowledge, tends to be intensive rather than comprehensive. In their enthusiasm and crusading zeal they tend to lose a certain proportion and breadth of vision, and they are inclined to identify themselves solely with one technique of warfare.

In this basic conflict between the military career man and the specialist, between the soldier and the technician, lies much of the acrimony of mid-twentieth century military disputes, yet a modern armed force needs both points of view. Without the one, there would be little progress; without the other there would be no balance. As the engines of war have come more and more to outweigh the men who use them, the specialists have achieved a measure of ascendancy. World War I was fought to a conclusion by the soldiers, World War II by the technicians.

To some extent the public has become converted to the cult of the machine, and its changing temper has been reflected in its changing attitude toward military leaders. The heroes of the past were essentially textbook soldiers. Washington, Jackson, Lee, Sherman, Pershing were professional field commanders, not weapon enthusiasts. On the other hand, the saviors of today and tomorrow are scientists, inventors, technicians: Wernher von Braun, a captured enemy asset and far-sighted space technician; Admiral Rickover, unorthodox and controversial "father of the atomic submarine"; Generals Curtis E. LeMay and Thomas S. Power, wielders of thunderbolts of automated nuclear destruction; General Bernard Schriever,

brilliant organizer of research and development; General Gavin, airborne foot-soldier and articulate prophet of "vertical envelopment". Interestingly enough, each of these men has had his arguments with his military and civilian superiors, but none became a Billy Mitchell. They won their points because their government believed them. In this sense, probably more than in any other, Mitchell was indeed "ahead of his time". Mitchell fought bitterly for dreams that were not yet ready to be translated into reality. He spoke with a sense of urgency that his nation could not be persuaded to share, and with Quixotic idealism he relentlessly pushed his cause all the way to the point of self-immolation.

2 [So, on this October day in Washington, a hero had reached the ultimate crisis of his military career. Seated ^{stiffly} erect yet relaxed between ^{his} his civilian and Army counsel at the defense table, attired in his breeches and boots and his unorthodox easy-fitting blouse with its wide lapels and oversize patch pockets, his chest ablaze with the decorations of three nations and his prized A.E.F. pilot wings, ^{he} he looked the picture of competence and confidence. Facing him across the polished expanse of ^{the} the long court table sat the twelve general officers who were to determine his fate. To Mitchell's right, but close by in this crowded courtroom, Colonel Sherman Moreland, Trial Judge Advocate, read the charges to the court.

"..Violation of the 96th Article of War....in that Colonel William Mitchell made statements prejudicial to good order and military discipline..."

¹⁵ (The charge sheet contained fifty three pages of text, all built around a two-thousand wordND statement Billy had released to the press on the 5th of September, 1925, and a subsequent statement on the 9th. The Specifications to the Charge alleged that these statements constituted conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline, were insubordinate to the administration of the War Department, highly contemptuous and disrespectful, and uttered with intent to discredit said administration, as well as the Navy Department.²

⁴ In spite of the ponderous verbosity of the charges, Billy had commented that he was being tried under the same article that would apply had he kicked a mule.³

This reaction epitomized the trial.⁵ It was the final ordeal of a military leader who had never been brought to heel, a brash but brilliant adventurer confronted by the stern judicial processes of an orderly military caste. It was a confrontation between Army men of a totally different stamp, and the nation found itself compelled to take sides.

The Mitchell story is part of the American legend. It tells^{VS} of the birth pangs of military aviation, of the awakening of the nation to a new age. Most of all, though, it is part of the continuing drama of the inherent conflict between the traditional military virtues and the American ideal of individualism. It is the story of a classic clash between the school of "Yes, sir; No, sir; No excuse, sir" and "The man who wouldn't shut up."⁶

² Charge Sheet - Mitchell Court-Martial, Library of Congress (see Fig. 1)

³ Mitchell, Ruth, My Brother Bill, p. 311.

Extract from Charge Sheet of General Court-Martial

Charge: Violation of the 96th Article of War.

Specification 1. In that Colonel William Mitchell, Air Service, did at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, on or about the 5th day of September, 1925, conduct himself to the prejudice of good order and military discipline and in a way to bring discredit upon the military service by making, uttering and publishing to Harry McCleary, A.H. Yeager, Kenneth McCalla and to the Associated Press...., and in the San Antonio Express, a public journal, and in divers other public journals of the United States, a statement which in its entirety reads in substance as follows:

Specification 2. In that Colonel William Mitchell, Air Service, on or about the 5th day of September, 1925, did make a statement insubordinate to the administration of the War Department, and did utter and publish said statement:.....

Specification 3: In that Colonel William Mitchell, Air Service, on or about the 5th day of September, 1925, with intent to discredit the administration of the War Department, did make a statement highly contemptuous and disrespectful of said administration, and did utter and publish said statement:....

Specification 4. In that Colonel William Mitchell, Air Service, on or about the 5th day of September, 1925, with intent to discredit the administration of the Navy Department, did make a statement highly contemptuous and disrespectful of said administration, and did utter and publish said statement:.....

All of which was conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline.

Specifications 5, 6, 7, and 8: The same, with reference to public statement uttered and published by Colonel William Mitchell, at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, on or about the 9th day of September, 1925.

Accuser: (signed) Kyle Rucker, Lieutenant Colonel
Judge Advocate General's Dept.
Chief, Military Affairs Section
Judge Advocate General's Office.

Referred to Colonel Sherman Moreland for trial October 21, 1925

by: (signed) A.E. Saxton
Adjutant General

Charges served on the accused October 28, 1925, by: Capt. K.J. Fielder
Acting Adjutant
Military District of Washington.

CHAPTER I

WHO WAS BILLY MITCHELL? (1898-1911)

"A Niçois who has made his mark"¹. Of the many things Billy Mitchell was called during his turbulent life, this was perhaps the only reference that called attention to his birthplace. For Billy was indeed born a Frenchman, in a geographical sense at least. On December 29th, 1879 he was born in Nice, on the French Riviera, and for the first eleven months of his life he lived in a house called the Maison Corinaldi, on the Place Grimaldi, a building which today still bears a plaque to his memory. Billy's parents, John Lendrum Mitchell and his wife, the former Harriet D. Becker, were spending a protracted honeymoon in Nice when young William arrived. Years later, during the Great War, the happy accident of Billy's French origin would be a factor which would help endear him to the French people, but in 1880 it was a peaceful world as Billy left for his family home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Mitchells were influential people in Milwaukee, thanks largely to the activities of Billy's grandfather, Alexander Mitchell, a bearded patriarch and vigorous lawyer who had had his history of brushes with vested authority. In fact, in the course of his championing of the rights of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad, Alexander Mitchell had been publicly castigated by no less a figure than the elder Senator Robert M. LaFollette for "brazen defiance of the law"². A gentler facet of the family

¹Unidentified clipping from English language Nice newspaper - Mitchell Papers, Container 22, Library of Congress.

²Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.27.

tradition was evidenced by Billy's father, a humanitarian who later rose to the position of United States Senator. The family political tradition was Democratic, one which Billy never saw fit to change. In a strange crossing of paths, the Mitchells' acquaintances in Milwaukee included the family of General Arthur MacArthur, whose son Douglas was one of Billy's boyhood friends.

² In 1895 Billy completed his early education in Milwaukee schools and entered George Washington University. World Events, however, were to interfere before he could complete his college course. The destruction of the U.S.S. Maine and the subsequent declaration of war against Spain in 1898 constituted outside distractions that Billy could not pass up. He left George Washington and returned to his home state to enlist.^{??}

³ On May 7th, 1898, less than a week after Commodore George Dewey's spectacular victory in Manila Bay, William Mitchell's military career began. ⁹⁰⁰Brash and thirsty for action, he enlisted as a private in Company M of the First Wisconsin Infantry Regiment and left almost immediately by troop train for Jacksonville, Florida, to begin training at the tent-city called Camp Cuba Libre.

Like the other training camps hastily set up for the war against Spain, Camp Cuba Libre presented a picture of chaos. On the subject of these camps, Brigadier General M.B. Stewart was later to write: "With few general officers or staff officers, everything had to be extemporized. Unprepared in every sense for war, we went about our job with a cheerfulness and zeal born of our own vast ignorance. Most of our efforts would have caused a modern commander

to go gray overnight and would have bred hysterics in our present highly-schooled staff."³

In view of the desperate need for technical and staff officers, it was not surprising that a mercurial lad like Private Mitchell with his collegiate background would be quickly selected as officer material. The swiftness of this development, however, was breathtaking.⁴ After only seven days duty as a private soldier, Billy was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Signal Corps, making him the youngest commissioned officer in the Army at the time.⁴ He served for some months amid the chaos of Camp Cuba Libre, then was sent to Washington, D.C. to assist in the organization of newly formed Signal units. He had not been long in the capital before he had an opportunity to demonstrate that he was no ordinary beardless "shavetail", but a young man capable of courageous, decisive action and blessed with that rare gift, natural leadership.] The battlefield in this instance was a saloon, the story amusing but impressive.

Temporary barracks and tent-cities had blossomed in war-time Washington and troops were being marshaled into them under conditions of hectic confusion. Newly enlisted men milled about, being moved hither and yon, separated from their records, unpaid for months, bored and impatient. A company of such soldiers, proceeding through downtown Washington one hot afternoon, decided it

³ Friedel, Frank, The Splendid Little War, p.36.

⁴ Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.33.

had had enough and hilariously invaded the kitchen and bar of the American House. It was not long before a riot developed, and the smashing of glass and furniture could be heard for blocks. The civilian police were ill-equipped to handle this sort of situation, and the young company officers had long since fled to the Area Command headquarters to ask for help.

Young Lieutenant Mitchell happened to be at the command post at the time and promptly volunteered to have a look at the problem. After all, action was action, whether in Cuba or in Washington. He took along a small detail of husky non-coms and rattled off to the scene in a commandeered street-car. The American House was a center of bedlam by the time he arrived. Sounds of drunken singing, crashes of breaking bottles and the thud of falling bodies rolled from the dim interior of the saloon, as gaping civilians and wary police stood at a safe distance outside. Billy leaped down from the trolley, unhooked his service revolver and handed it to the sergeant at his side. He quickly posted the detail outside the saloon door, and alone and unarmed he threw open the swinging doors and strode in. In a stentorian voice that could be heard across the street he bellowed "ATTENSHUN!" There was a sudden silence, and to the amazement of the onlookers the battered rioters meekly staggered out into the sunlight, where the detail took over and lined them up in ranks. Billy dismissed the street-car and personally marched the groggy troops the four long miles back to barracks. Once they were safely tucked away, he returned to headquarters and reported to the captain.

"You're back sooner than I expected," remarked the captain.

"All right, how many reinforcements will you need?"

"Reinforcements?" Billy snapped, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Your troops are back in barracks, Captain. I think they could stand a little cleaning up. And it would help if you paid them."

And with that the new lieutenant stalked off to his billet. ⁵

This incident was cited years later by two of Mitchell's biographers, Isaac Don Levine and Billy's sister Ruth, as an early portent of what this man was to be. Certainly there was nothing in this little adventure to suggest an officer willing to seek refuge in "the book", to delegate unpleasant or dangerous responsibilities to subordinates, or to be unduly impressed by rank either above or below his own. Here was a man willing to do things himself, a man who appreciated the need for military discipline and who could instill it. Yet he did not seek slavish discipline as an end in itself.

An individualist at heart, Billy was certainly not attracted to the military service by any love of form, order or punctilio. It was the war that drew him at first, with its attendant opportunity for self-fulfillment in action and for patriotic service in the line of duty to his country. A natural leader, he found satisfaction in a line of work that provided the chance to deal with men, to direct their operations and to assume the responsibility for his own decisions. This ready assumption of responsibility could not be expected to endear him to his superior officers under all circumstances, but as a junior officer he found himself frequently shouldering burdens appropriate to higher ranks.

Generally speaking, as long as he was in the "working ranks" his eagerness and aggressiveness was appreciated, and these qualities gave impetus to his rise up the career ladder. Moreover, his assignment to the Signal Corps gave Billy a tangible technical specialty he could master and enjoy. From the beginning, then, Billy Mitchell fell naturally into the caste of technical officers, a self-confident specialist rather than a spit-and-polish advocate of "the system".

Although the war in Cuba was of short duration, Billy succeeded in getting into it for a brief period. He commanded a Signal unit in the Santiago sector and got a first-hand look at the muddy, filthy, stench-ridden front before hostilities ground to a halt with General Toral's surrender. He was involved in no direct combat, but the challenge of improvisation under battle conditions intrigued him. Appalled by the confusion and inefficiency he saw on all sides, he set his mind to devising solutions for the chronic battlefield chaos. The need for better communications was obvious. The memory of this unwieldy, floundering army wallowing about, in ignorance of the movements and intentions of the enemy as well as of its own ancillary forces remained with him and formed a backdrop for his own personal drama in the next war eighteen years later.

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A beneficial side-effect of the Washington riot episode was that it brought Billy Mitchell to the personal attention of Brigadier General Adolphus W. Greely, a noted Arctic explorer who was serving as Chief Signal Officer. Impressed by Billy's

nerve and ability, General Greely commended him personally, and thus began a friendship which was to be long-lasting. Years later, one of Billy's last books to be published would be his biography of Greely.

After cessation of hostilities in Cuba, Billy remained on in command of his Signal company and gained valuable experience in stringing communications wires through jungle areas. In the execution of his work he was strictly on his own, solving problems by ingenuity and nerve, whether the problems were technical or those involving snakes, armed guerrillas or yellow fever. Through it all, though, his chief desire was to be transferred to the Philippines where the Aguinaldo Insurrection had just broken out. Although his father, Senator Mitchell, refused to use political influence to obtain such a transfer, he managed to inform General Greely of the young man's ambitions. Greely had not forgotten Billy. In fact, in June, 1899, he commented on one of Billy's reports from Cuba:

...It is a very creditable report, and indicates that this officer, despite his youth, is a man of ability, energy and intelligence. I have seen few reports giving so much information in clear-cut form on a technical subject of such range.

In August, 1899, the long-awaited orders came through, and by November Billy was in the Philippines. By a quirk of coincidence he found himself serving in the division commanded by his family's old Milwaukee neighbor, General Arthur MacArthur, whose son Douglas had just been appointed to the Military Academy.

The Signal Corps had learned its lesson well from its Cuban experience. In the Philippine Insurrection, according to the New York Times, the Signal men "covered themselves with glory . . . there was no condition of affairs of which the officers at the front were aware, which he (the general) too did not know."⁷ In one notable instance, Billy Mitchell voluntarily devised and led a project to connect General Henry W. Lawton's command post with headquarters. This exploit required putting together makeshift lines utilizing wires from old Spanish wire-wound cannons, barbed wire and anything else that could be found, stringing them through guerrilla-infested jungle ground and powering them with makeshift batteries. Billy's detail made the line work, and without the loss of a man. Later Billy participated in the long pursuit of Aguinaldo. In a midnight raid with only fifteen men, Billy distinguished himself by personally capturing Captain Mendoza, Aguinaldo's adjutant. Finally, it was the underground information net discovered and exposed by Billy and his unit that eventually led to the capture of the wily Aguinaldo himself. Billy pleaded to be allowed to follow up this trail, but General MacArthur entrusted the job instead to the old soldier of fortune, Colonel Frederick Funston.

Billy was becoming more and more aware of world events, and his expressed views were decidedly imperialistic in tone. "I think we'll have to turn in and lick the Cubans before long," he had written. "...They are no more capable of self-government than a lot of ten-year old children. The only way to settle this

thing is to annex the whole outfit, fight them until they dare fight no more..."⁸

Of the Philippine operation Billy commented, "The U.S. is trying to do a thing here in two years with 100,000 men that another would do with 300,000 in twenty, and the U.S. will come pretty near doing it."⁹

Regarding the Boer War in South Africa, he said he was "pleased to see that England is getting the better of the Boers!"

Viewing his own future in the light of world events, he wrote to his mother, who was visiting Germany at the time:

I think there will be a big stick-up somewhere one of these days, and not very far away and probably with the very country in which you are now in (sic) - among others. This makes me want to hold a commission in the regular establishment. ¹⁰

* * * * *

His tour of duty in the Philippines completed, Billy returned home "the long way round", via Japan, China, the Straits Settlements, India, the Suez Canal, Egypt where he met his father, Paris where he celebrated his twenty-first birthday, and finally his new station at Fort Myer, across the Potomac from Washington.

A headquarters post like Fort Myer held no charms for the adventure-loving young lieutenant. He soon found that General Greely was deeply concerned about a wire-stringing project in Alaska, which was making dismally slow progress. Alaska was an

⁸ Levine, Op.cit., p.45.

⁹ Ibid., p.47.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.56 (Cf: Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.59.)

appealing prospect to Billy, partly because of the stories he had heard about it from Colonel Funston, partly because it was America's last frontier, and partly because of its significance as a stepping-stone to Asia. At Billy's request, General Greely sent him north on a field trip to look into the problem. The answers were not long in coming. What was wrong, Billy reported, was that the construction people were attempting to do all their work in the summer, when the pack horses could pull very little through the soft ground. Instead, he proposed, they should forget their traditional fear of the cold and do all their pack work, setting out lines, supplies, food and forage, during the winter months, leaving the summer for the digging of post holes and the actual erection of the poles.

Coming as they did from a man with virtually no Arctic experience, these proposals were radical in the extreme. When Billy made them, however, he typically volunteered his own services to do the job. Both his recommendation and his offer were accepted. He was sent to Alaska under General Harold Randall's command, and was entrusted with job of stringing the major portion of telegraph wire across the Alaskan interior. This achievement turned out to be Billy Mitchell's most spectacular pre-World War accomplishment.

In extreme contrast to his tropical experience, Mitchell was working in temperatures as low as seventy below zero, pioneering work in the Arctic winter that no one had ever tried before. Improvising all the way, working with dog teams, mules, Indians, prospectors and trappers, he pushed through and cached the needed

equipment from Eagle City to Valdez, down the Tanana River, over Thompson Pass, to complete the communications link through central Alaska. General Greely had estimated that the job would take three to four years. It was done in two. On June 7th, 1903 the old general received a wire from the wilderness: "REPORT LINE THROUGH ALASKA COMPLETED SIGNED WILLIAM MITCHELL." An electrical communication line was open from Washington through to Nome on the Bering Sea, and as Billy wrote: "We had broken the portal ... which shut out the white man from the North ... America's last frontier had been roped and hog-tied."¹¹ In spite of a gloriously mixed metaphor, Billy's enthusiasm came through clearly.

Billy returned from Alaska a captain, but he was still not to be buried in a sedentary peacetime army. As a Signal Corps instructor at the Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and as a member of the Field Artillery Board at Fort Riley, Kansas, he devised methods for carrying antenna wires aloft by kites to achieve tremendous increase in communications range. In April, 1906, the San Francisco earthquake and fire occurred and Billy was on the spot within three days helping to restore communications, and incidentally working again with his old friend, now General Funston. Later in 1906 the Cuban rebellion broke out and Billy was back on familiar ground as chief signal officer. Within a year he completely reorganized and rebuilt the Cuban telegraph system and constructed the first high-power wireless stations on the island. In 1909 he was

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Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.174. (cf: Levine, Op.cit., p.69.)

sent again to the Philippines to carry out a confidential mission locating Japanese outlying wireless stations. While in the Islands he participated in rescue and restoration work at the time of the 1910 eruption of the Taal volcano in Luzon. He returned to the United States in 1911, served briefly on the Mexican border, and was then assigned to Washington as Signal Officer on the War Department General Staff. Only thirty-two years old, he was the youngest officer ever to have been assigned to the general staff. ¹²

The first thirteen years of Billy Mitchell's career represent his non-flying period, the years of preparation. He had already stamped himself a most unusual officer, a man of action, energy and imagination. His experience had been of a kind which placed maximum reliance on his own individual ingenuity and courage, and in such assignments he had acquitted himself handsomely. There was a dash about the way he accomplished things and about the way he reported them. In an era of colorful individualists, explorers, soldiers of fortune, adventurers, Billy stood tall. One difference was that he was always a soldier. Although abhorring slavish worship of "the book" or of established procedures, he was still proud of his uniform, military to his fingertips and devoutly patriotic. His sense of responsibility was deeply personal and something he could not pass off to subordinates. His mastery of his technical specialty was something at which he felt driven to be outstanding. His was a mind and a body which could not rest.

It was at this juncture, in 1911, that William Mitchell and the airplane crossed paths, an encounter destined to be a fateful one.

CHAPTER II

BILLY MITCHELL AND WORLD WAR I (1912-1918)

Through the year 1911 Billy Mitchell's military specialty had been communications, and by his ingenuity and interest he had helped considerably to advance its technical progress. Now he became interested in something new - the infant science of aeronautics.

As a matter of interest, Billy's old commander and family friend, General Greely, had played a significant role in the birth of heavier-than-air aviation. In 1896 Greely had observed the demonstration flight of the scale-model "aerodrome" built by his friend Samuel Pierpont Langley. At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898 Greely, as Chief Signal Officer, was in charge of military aeronautics (manned and unmanned observation balloons). On May 25, 1898, he addressed a letter to Secretary of War Russell A. Alger recommending development of Langley's machine, and urging "the great importance of such a machine for warfare and the great good that would result to the world at large should the flying machine be made practicable." The result was a special congressional allotment of fifty thousand dollars for Langley's further experimentation. Although Langley's efforts were not fully successful, his work and his prestige lent encouragement to Wilbur and Orville Wright.¹

¹

Mitchell, William, General Greely, pp.71-73.

7 / There is no evidence that Billy Mitchell was aware of this early interest in aviation on the part of General Greely, but he came³¹ to appreciate it later on, especially in view of the apathy with which the Army and Navy later regarded the military potential of aviation.³⁵

Billy began studying the problems of flight while he was in Alaska. During the long Arctic nights he read a great deal on Signal Corps subjects to prepare for the examinations for his captaincy. Among these subjects aeronautics played an important part, and Billy mastered the material on balloon-handling, gas manufacture, and even some data on the glider experiments of the Lillienthal brothers in Germany and of Octave Chanute in America. All this was simply background knowledge, however, and during the years between 1903 and 1911 Billy was busy in Cuba and the Philippines while the Army at home was making its first tentative ventures into the aeronautical field of heavier-than-air flight.

The Army's initial steps into aviation were cautious indeed. In 1906, three years after the Wright Brothers' first successful powered flight at Kill Devil Hill, Army balloonist Lieutenant Frank P. Lahm persuaded his superiors to allow him and three other officers to undergo flight training with the Wrights. In 1907 the Signal Corps tentatively requested bids for the construction of a "military aeroplane" capable of carrying for one hour one passenger in addition to its pilot, of attaining a speed of forty miles per hour for ten miles, of flying a total distance of 125 miles, and of being "demountable", that is capable of being transported in an army wagon.

The Wrights supplied such an aircraft in 1908, the so-called Wright "B" Pusher. The War Department had no appropriation to cover its purchase, but President Theodore Roosevelt and his Secretary of War, William Howard Taft, managed to dip into some special presidential funds to pay for it.² During the preliminary tests of this machine, the first model crashed at Fort Myer, injuring Orville Wright and killing its Army passenger, Lieutenant Thomas Selfridge, who thus became the nation's first military air casualty.

By 1911, when Captain Mitchell was assigned to the general staff, the little Aviation Section of the Signal Corps was manned by a handful of daredevil young officers from other branches of the service. They had volunteered to learn flying from the American pioneers in aviation - the Wrights, Glenn Curtiss, Arch Hoxey, Walter Brookins, Leonard Bonney and others. They practiced at isolated little fields at Simms Station, near Dayton, Ohio, at College Park, Maryland, at San Antonio, Texas and at Newport News, Virginia. The public was intrigued by the spectacular exploits and harrowing crashes, but the War Department was decidedly cool toward what it considered expensive and dangerous nonsense.

Captain Mitchell, from his vantage point as Signal Officer on the General Staff, did not consider aviation nonsense. He had already become aware that other nations were developing aviation into a military weapon. He visited Japan in 1912 and discovered that that nation had fourteen military aircraft and was at least

as far along technically as the United States. In the Balkan Wars of 1912, Bulgarian and Greek aviators were using aircraft as weapons, providing the first recorded instances of air-to-air rifle fire and aerial bombing.³ Germany was developing its Zeppelin fleet into a formidable threat, and France had the surprising total of 1200 military airplanes. At this very moment, what with casualties, resignations and financial retrenchment, the United States Army had exactly two airplanes and two fully qualified pilots, Lieutenants Thomas Milling and Henry Harley Arnold.⁴

Despite the pitiably small size of the American air establishment, interest was stirring in Congress as to how this new development might best be integrated into the military structure. With surprising but premature foresight, the House Committee on Military Affairs considered the feasibility of setting up an independent air arm.⁵ Brigadier General George P. Scriven, Chief Signal Officer, and all the other officers called as witnesses disapproved of the proposal, with the sole exception of Captain Paul Beck. At this time Billy Mitchell concurred in the general view, feeling that the time was not yet ripe for an independent experimental service, although he was heartily in favor of centralized control of aviation. In this, his first appearance before a

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Jordanoff, Assen, Your Wings, pp.42-44. (Cf: Levine, Op.cit., pp.81-84.)

4

Arnold, Op.cit., p.29.

5

U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Military Affairs, Hearings, Military Organization, 62d Congress, 3d Session, 1913.

Congressional committee, although his testimony was most thorough it was also exhaustingly long-winded. To the discomfiture of his listeners he talked for hours without interruption. This scene was to be repeated in later years. Billy had a definite tendency to get carried away by his subject, and when he did, time meant absolutely nothing! ⁶

The issue of centralized control of the armed forces began to loom large in Billy's mind about this time. It was a theme which, in the words of Billy's biographer Isaac Don Levine, "was destined to run like a red thread through the entire future crusade of Billy Mitchell." In a paper prepared for the Army War College in July, 1915, he envisaged the possibility of an invasion of the American coast "by hostile patrol vessels and aircraft". He urged creation of a Council of National Defense to place "the whole national defense brains ... under one roof". ⁷

The European war which had been in progress since August, 1914, had given immense stimulus to the development of military aviation in Europe, and Billy was quick to evaluate the airplane as the weapon of the future. He determined immediately to take flight instruction. Since he was a Major, a member of the General Staff Corps, and thirty-six years of age, the War Department refused to assign him to flying school. Undaunted, Billy proceeded to learn flying on his own time and at his own expense. He would

⁶ Arnold, Op.cit., p.43.

⁷ Levine, Op.cit., p.86.

leave Washington each Saturday night on the night boat to Newport News, fly all day Sunday at the Glenn Curtiss Company and return to Washington by the Sunday night boat. For four Sundays he flew with his instructor, Walter Lees. After that he flew solo. He wryly observed that one bad crackup taught him more about flying than anything that happened in the air.

His flying training completed, Billy was appointed Executive Officer of the Aviation Section, in which capacity he undertook to vitalize this moribund activity. A number of young pilots, having reached the marrying stage, had decided to request relief from flying duty and to return to the less hazardous pursuits of their original branches of the service. One of them, Henry H. ("Hap") Arnold, had been back with the Infantry for a little over two years, when the impact of Billy's appointment reached him. Later he recalled the circumstances:

We were at sea aboard a San Francisco-bound transport in the late winter of 1915-16 when I received a radiogram from the Adjutant General as abrupt as my original invitation to flight training had been. Would I volunteer for duty in the Aviation Section? Or if so detailed would I object? Naturally, I sent back a reply asking what that meant. Immediately I received another message: "If you apply for detail in the Aviation Section, Signal Corps, you will come in with the rank of Captain. If not, you will be detailed and will come in with the rank of First Lieutenant." I knew at once that my old friend Billy Mitchell was on the job in Washington. 8

Billy started building up the Aviation Section's personnel strength, but he ran into hard going when it came to obtaining equipment. He was under no illusions that America would be able to stay out of the war, Wilson's campaign slogan of 1916 to the contrary

notwithstanding. With the cooperation of Representative James Hay of Virginia, Chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee, and with the active support of the Aero Club of America, Billy secured the first substantial appropriation for aviation, a sum of thirteen million dollars. Events took an unexpected turn when the Aero Club recommended that nine million dollars of the total be spent by the National Guard on developing air units. Mitchell opposed this suggestion bitterly, insisting that no group should be allowed to hamstring the Army in the disposition of its funds. One of his public remarks at this time was reported as: "To hell with the National Guard - it will never amount to anything!"

This remark was cited in a bill of complaints submitted by the Aero Club to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker. The Secretary's investigation and report completely exonerated Billy, but it was notable that this was merely the first occasion on which Baker had to become involved in Billy's public controversies. The public feud, moreover, had not endeared Billy to Washington officialdom, and an early opportunity was sought to send this outspoken young officer to some more remote place. The opportunity was not long in coming.

When the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany on February 2nd, 1917, Billy knew that war was not far off. He requested an assignment from the War Department to go to Europe as an observer, and it would appear that the War Department was more than willing to grant his request. He arrived in Spain on March 29th, and as he crossed into France the United States declared war.

The details of Billy Mitchell's exploits in World War I could fill many books. Most remarkable, however, was his achievement in assuming de facto command of American air operations almost immediately upon his arrival in Paris. He sought official sanction for setting up an air branch of the military mission in the French capital, but got no reply from Washington. With no further ado, using his own funds and those of friends, he proceeded to set up an American air organization. Believing firmly in the value of direct experience, he overrode the protests of the French staff and spent ten days in the front-line trenches, then became the first American in the United States service to fly over the front lines in battle. He visited Rheims during a heavy artillery bombardment, underwent his first air-raid in Chalons-sur-Marne, and received his first wound. He visited Marshal Henri Petain, conferred with British Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard and flew with the Royal Flying Corps, examined captured German equipment, studied French and German methods and tactics, and was awarded his first Croix de Guerre - all this within a few weeks of his arrival. Meanwhile he bombarded Washington with a ceaseless flow of recommendations on every subject from bombs and parachutes to aerial photography and night combat. He selected three of the most tried and tested European aircraft types and engines and recommended their immediate production in the United States, with concurrent development efforts toward production of superior American designs. To cover the interim period of construction of factories in America, he urged the despatch of American mechanics and materials to France to increase French output.

Receiving no answer on any subject from Washington, Billy sat down with the French General Headquarters staff and helped draw up recommendations that resulted in a real bombshell - a cablegram of May 24th, 1917 from Premier Alexandre Ribot to President Woodrow Wilson demanding production of 16,500 planes and 30,000 engines during the first six months of 1918. This message actually launched America's great aviation program, and Billy's role in it was not fully appreciated until some time later. In his diary in May, 1917 he remarked laconically, "I decided it will be a good thing to get the French Government to exert pressure on ours."⁹

Having thus indirectly prodded American production, Billy entertained sanguine hopes for the future, in which he was to be bitterly disappointed. Aircraft procurement and supply was a sore subject between Billy and his superiors throughout the war. That the program got off to a slow start and bogged down badly was certainly not Billy's fault. On the other hand, he could only see the problem through the eyes of the combat flyers, who were desperately tired of waiting for the promised thousands of airplanes. Billy rightly blamed the slowdown on governmental inefficiency and lack of qualified central direction. What he failed to take into account was the fact that an immense industry could not be created overnight. The appropriations of over one and one-half billion dollars simply saturated the infant industry and resulted in considerable wheel-spinning before real production got under way.

Statistics covering this period can be deceptive. The most reliable figures, taken directly from the Army Air Service inventory (see Table I.) show a total of 11,754 American-built aircraft accepted by the Army up until the Armistice and 2,317 afterward. Of this total, however, only 5,443 were combat craft. Further, only 1,442 airplanes reached France before the Armistice, and of these a mere 196, ready for use, reached the combat squadrons. Obviously, as far as American industry's impact on the air war was concerned, the mountain had labored and brought forth a mouse. American air units in combat were equipped exclusively with European aircraft, purchased for the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) from the Allied governments during 1917 and 1918. The only American-built aircraft to reach the front were British-designed DeHavilland DH-4's manufactured under international agreement, so that not one truly American airplane fought in World War I. Convinced as he was that the United States was the birthplace of the airplane, Billy Mitchell found this circumstance particularly galling, and the memory of it colored his attitudes for years to come. On the Fourth of July, 1917, this plaintive note was entered in his diary: "Our air force consists of one Nieuport plane which I use myself, and that is all."¹⁰

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Levine, Op.cit., p.100. The Nieuport referred to was a French combat aircraft, and was probably the first of those supplied to the American forces by the French Government.

TABLE 1

AMERICAN AIRCRAFT PRODUCTION 1917-1918.

| | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Total Aircraft Accepted: | to Nov. 11, 1918 | -11,754 |
| | after Nov. 11, 1918 | - 2,317 |
| | Total | <u>14,171</u> |

| | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Major Items Produced: | Curtiss JN-4 trainers | 5,035 |
| | Curtiss JN-6 trainers | 1,035 |
| | DeHavilland DH-4 (see note) | 4,846 |
| | Standard SJ-1 trainers | 2,001 |
| | Thomas Morse S4 combat | 597 |

(Note: DH-4's manufactured by Dayton-Wright Co. - 3,106
 Fisher Body Co. - 1,600
 Standard Acft. Co. - 140)

AMERICAN-BUILT AIRCRAFT IN FRANCE BY NOV. 11, 1918.

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| DeHavilland DH-4 | - 1,440 |
| Pachard-LePere LUSAC-11 | - 2 |
| Total | <u>1,442</u> |

Plus parts for 100 Handley-Page bombers, sent to England.

EUROPEAN-PROCURED AIRCRAFT FOR THE A.E.F. - 1917-1918.

| | |
|------------------|--------------|
| French Aircraft | - 4,881 |
| British Aircraft | - 258 |
| Italian Aircraft | - 19 |
| Total | <u>5,158</u> |

| | | |
|------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Combat aircraft: | French - Breguet 14 | - 376 |
| | x Caudron | - 202 |
| | Nieuport | - 861 |
| | Salmson | - 705 (British design) |
| | Sopwith 1 | - 514 " " |
| | SPAD | - 1,124 |
| | British- Sopwith Camel | - 143 |
| | Italian- S.I.A. (Fiat) | - 19 |

(Data from U.S. Army Aircraft 1908-1945, compiled by James Fahey from the records of the Air Materiel Command. Published by the Aviation Publishing Company, New York, 1945)

Not only was the aircraft production program stumbling, but as so often happens in times of national crisis, it was accompanied by wildly unrealistic propaganda. Figures of 12,000 and 20,000 aircraft per six-month period were airily promised by War Department spokesmen in testimony before Congressional committees, and forecasts of 100,000 aircraft at the front were noised in the press.¹¹ An untoward result was that Germany hastily increased its aircraft production, and the increase was not matched by any corresponding improvement on the Allied side. At a Congressional investigation hearing two years later Billy Mitchell testified that "these bombastic reports were dangerous things", and Eddie Rickenbacker alleged that the extravagant advertising "was the worst thing in the world that we could possibly have done".¹² The procurement debacle was to provide Billy Mitchell with much ammunition for his battles with higher authority in the years to come.

Not that he did not have such battles during the war. While struggling to get an adequately manned and equipped air organization in the field at the time of the great German attack of March, 1918, Billy became engaged in a heated argument with his top commander, General John J. Pershing. His diary noted that there was much "pounding on the table with fists on both sides of the argument." Pershing finally told Mitchell that if he did not

¹¹ Levine, Op.cit., pp.101-102.

¹² Ibid., p.102.

stop trying to change the air organization he would send him home. Billy responded that in that case Pershing might well follow him home. "Black Jack" laughed and the argument ended on a friendly note.¹³

Billy's military command status and personnel relationships were continually involved in snarls. He had, as we have seen, established himself as the unofficial leader of all American aviation in Europe, but "without portfolio" as Hap Arnold puts it. Nearly a year after Billy's arrival, the War Department got around to sending an official chief of air service to France, the veteran pilot Brigadier General Benjamin D. Foulois. Billy was placed in command of the combat air units of the First Army Corps under General Hunter Liggett. Although there had been areas of friction between the two airmen, Foulois recommended in July that Billy succeed him in his job as chief of aviation for Pershing's Army. Foulois took charge of training and supply in the rear areas. Loath to place an airman in the top assignment, Pershing had given the job of air chief of the A.E.F. to his old friend Major General Mason M. Patrick, a non-flying officer from the Corps of Engineers.

Regardless of the technicalities of official orders, Billy Mitchell was by all odds the most potent personality among the air commanders. Throughout the war he remained an active flying hero. In September, 1917, the War Department belatedly issued its Special Order 226 awarding Billy the rating of "junior military

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Levine, Op.cit., p.108.

aviator" as of the preceding July. The following day he was promoted to Colonel, but he never became a headquarters officer. At the height of the period of tension preceding the long-awaited German offensive on the Marne salient in July, 1918, Billy flew a lone reconnaissance mission far into enemy territory and spotted the newly erected pontoon bridges on which the Germans were preparing to cross the Marne. This intelligence made it possible for Foch and Pershing to meet and contain the main attack. Subsequently, Billy organized and personally led a full-scale bombing attack on the German supply center at Fere-en-Tardenois which opened Pershing's eyes to the potential of local air superiority and also contributed substantially to the success of the Chateau-Thierry operation, a major turning point of the war in 1918.

The Fere-en-Tardenois operation was the first large-scale coordinated air offensive launched in the war. In September Billy had the opportunity to develop his ideas on a much more extensive scale. When the American attack on the St. Mihiel salient was being planned, he persuaded Foch and Pershing to let him amass the greatest air strike force ever assembled and prepare a massive blow coordinated with that of the ground armies. This force totaled over 1,500 aircraft, in American, British, French, Belgian, Italian and Portuguese units, all under Billy Mitchell's command. The offensive, when launched, lasted four days, from the 12th to the 16th of September, 1918. Air superiority was retained throughout the entire offensive and not one bomber was lost to

enemy action. Over three thousand sorties were flown, seventy-five tons of high explosive dropped, and sixty enemy planes destroyed, all in spite of unfavorable weather. The first application of the tactical air theory of "isolation of the battlefield", this operation contributed heavily to the success of the St. Mihiel campaign and the entire Meuse-Argonne offensive.

Praise came in from all quarters after the St. Mihiel strike. General Pershing sent the following formal letter to Mitchell:

Please accept my sincere congratulations on the successful and very important part taken by the Air Forces under your command in the first offensive of the First American Army. The organization and control of the tremendous concentration of Air Forces, including American, French, British and Italian units, which has enabled the Air Service of the First Army to carry out successfully its dangerous and important mission, is as fine a tribute to you personally as is the courage and nerve shown by your officers a signal proof of the high morale which permeates the service under your command.

Please convey to your command my heartfelt appreciation of their work. I am proud of you all. 14

Marshal Hugh Trenchard of the Royal Flying Corps reported to Pershing that of all the air operations in his experience this was the first in which no unforeseen difficulty had occurred, no order had been misunderstood and no mission had failed. Trenchard enthused further, calling the operation "the greatest thing of its kind ever seen in the war ... the first example of massed air striking power ever seen." 15

14

Levine, Op.cit., p.135-136.

15

Ibid., p.161. (Trenchard's title was actually General at this time, but was changed to Air Marshal with the establishment of the Royal Air Force shortly after the war's end. For simplicity he is here referred to at all times as Air Marshal. MJM)

On the 13th of October orders came through promoting Billy to the rank of Brigadier General. He continued developing the techniques of air-ground cooperation to a point that would not be attained again until the days of the German blitzkrieg of 1939-40. Elated by the success of the St. Mihiel operation, he began plans for an even more ambitious project, years ahead in its conception. He proposed a more intense bombing concentration on the Metz front, to be accompanied by the dropping of parachute troops behind the German lines. Pershing gave his tacit consent to this project, but the war ended before it became necessary. Here was the genesis of the idea of parachute troops, an idea which lay dormant for fourteen years before the Soviets startled the world with it in 1932. A generation was to pass before the massive German airborne invasion of Crete, a generation during which the United States Army gave no thought whatever to the development of parachute troops. In retrospect, it is difficult to visualize how Billy Mitchell could have accomplished such a feat at Metz in 1918, considering the types of aircraft he had at his disposal, but he was famous for delivering what he promised, so the feasibility of this project cannot be shrugged off, no matter how visionary it might appear.

Long before the end of the war Billy had become a familiar and beloved figure to the French. Always flamboyant, in his sporty uniform and scarf, he drove everywhere at breakneck speed in a Mercedes racing car purported to be the fastest in Europe. He had an elan that the French found delightful.

Arriving at a time when their spirits were at a low ebb, he had helped restore a certain vitality to their war effort. They called him "Notre General Americain" and cheered him as he roared along the roads. France had many heroic pilots and America had brought more, like Eddie Rickenbacker, Frank Luke and Raoul Lufbery, but Billy Mitchell was something more. For he, more than anyone else, had organized air power into a war-winning weapon, and with it had secured important military victories. For the first time, it seemed, the individual flying aces had a leader who was cast in the heroic mold.

Billy rounded out his tour in Europe on a typical note, with characteristic disregard for protocol. Stationed briefly at Koblenz, he was visited by the Prince of Wales. When the Prince indicated a desire to fly, Billy promptly took him up in his two-seater SPAD and the two had an exuberant sight-seeing flight up and down the Rhine valley while diplomats and generals alike shuddered. Before he left Europe, Billy was invited to Buckingham Palace where he was personally thanked by King George V for the kindness shown the Prince. Billy brashly took the opportunity to suggest that the Prince should visit the United States. Whether due to this suggestion or not, the Prince did make such a visit, with considerable success.

With the war at an end, what was to be done with Billy Mitchell? His superiors recognized his talents but deplored his unorthodox approach. Plainly he had earned a high position, but Washington recognized a bull in a china shop when it saw one.

Although there was some agitation in the press and by air power enthusiasts for his appointment as Chief of the Air Service, no one who really knew him was surprised that he was denied the top post. Instead, an old cavalryman and division commander, Major General Charles T. Menoher, was unaccountably chosen to head the Army Air Service. In January, 1919, Billy returned from Europe as troop commander on the transport "Aquitania" and was appointed Menoher's assistant.

CHAPTER III

WHAT WAS BILLY MITCHELL FIGHTING FOR ? (1919-1920)

War Department Special Order 52, dated 3 March, 1919, announced the appointment of temporary Brigadier General William Mitchell to the post of Assistant Director of Military Aeronautics, relieving Colonel Archie Miller (later to be killed in a crash under dramatic circumstances). One week later War Department Special Order 57-0 further appointed Mitchell Director of Military Aeronautics, replacing Brigadier General William A. Kenly, retired. With the readjustments and reorganizations attendant upon the end of hostilities, it was not until July 16th, 1919, that Billy was officially named Assistant Chief of the Army Air Service with the rank of Brigadier General in the Regular Army. It was in this position that his role as the stormy petrel of the armed forces was to begin.

Up to this point Mitchell had been learning by experience what air power could do. He was farsighted enough to see beyond the limitations of the flimsy machines and inadequately trained personnel of World War I. But he was impatient too. Now that he found himself, as he thought, in a position to determine policy, he was eager to get started and to accelerate progress. More clearly, probably, than any other officer of his day, he saw the immense changes that the advent of the airplane had brought to the theories of war. It would be well at this point to review the

status of air power at the close of World War I, in order better to understand Billy Mitchell's goals and to be better acquainted with the cast of characters in the drama of 1919-1925.

It is characteristic of the military forces that their organizational structure tends to solidify. By a sort of military corollary to Parkinson's Law, an organizational chart, once drawn up, tends to perpetuate itself and stubbornly resists change. Traditions, insignia, ceremonial and custom grow like ivy (or barnacles) on the framework of established institutions and continue to flourish even after the institutions have outlived their usefulness. The glory of the English longbowmen caused them to be retained for a hundred years after the introduction of cannon, until they were blasted from the field of Formigny in 1450. The "Thin Red Line", the U.S.Cavalry, the plumed helmet, the saber, all became such deeply embedded military traditions that even when they could no longer possibly be utilized as combat elements, they were cherished on the ceremonial level.

Conversely, when a new weapon or tactic emerges it is frequently resisted as incompatible with what is already established. When it can no longer be ignored, it is generally incorporated into the existing structure, whether or not the organizational niche found for it is appropriate to its proper development. Thus we saw the ludicrous controversy of the post-World War II era over whether the ballistic missile properly belonged to the Air Force, the Navy or the Army Artillery.

The end of World War I found the ordered pattern of military thinking disturbed by the emergence of a new weapon, the airplane. Military doctrine had not been fundamentally changed since the invention and application of gunpowder. Hardware had been vastly improved, but the Infantry was still Queen of Battles and the capital ship still controlled the seas. The task of the army was to close with the enemy's army on the field of battle and to destroy it, then to occupy the enemy's land and seize his capital. The task of the navy was to destroy the enemy's naval forces, then his shipping, then to blockade his ports and starve him into submission. In the past a few geniuses like Napoleon Bonaparte or "Stonewall" Jackson had employed their tools with rare perception and finesse, but the rules were the same. World War I had seen no Napoleons or Jacksons and the war had been for the most part a stalemate. The defensive armament of both sides seemed invincible, and it was just a matter of seeing which could hold out the longest. It was a ghastly endurance contest, a blood-letting of incredible magnitude, a war fought to a conclusion of sorts with little skill or imagination.

Not entirely without imagination, though. To the land warfare a new ingredient had been added, on a very small scale. High above the field of battle, little snarling machines were penetrating behind the lines, delivering their stings in the unprotected rear, potentially exposing the so-called "Zone of the Interior" to the danger of bombs and bullets. After his first

few sorties in the battle zone in 1917, Billy Mitchell wrote in his diary: "A very significant thing to me was that we could cross the lines of these contending armies in a few minutes, ... whereas the armies have been locked in the struggle, immovable, powerless to advance, for three years."¹

Billy saw readily that a new dimension had been added to warfare, and the corollaries loomed large and explosive. The lessons of the European battlefields held clear warnings for the future security of the far-off United States. They developed essentially along these lines:

(a) The airplane was not in itself a weapon, but a carrier of weapons. As such it was highly versatile.

(b) Operating in a third dimension, the airplane was independent of the surface forces, and it should no longer be regarded as merely an auxiliary to those forces.

(c) The ground armies and navies could protect their nations only against other ground armies and navies, not against aviation.

(d) The existing limitations of aircraft as to size, speed, altitude, range and load were technological only, and would rapidly be erased.

(e) No conceivable barrier or defense, natural or man-made, could prevent the penetration of the interior of a country by air forces.

(f) While surface forces hacked at the perimeter of a nation's defenses, air power could strike at the enemy's heart - his

¹ Mitchell Papers, Container 28, Library of Congress.

industries, his communications, his ability to sustain a war.

(g) Just as the English Channel was no longer a barrier to German air attacks, neither would the oceans long be ramparts protecting the United States.

(h) The only effective defense against air power was air power itself.

(i) Three-dimensional war called for unified direction, by a single department of national defense.

"If a nation ambitious for universal conquest gets off to a flying start in a war of the future," wrote Billy Mitchell in 1919, "it may be able to control the whole world more easily than a nation has controlled a continent in the past."²

These lessons added up to a theory of war which Billy developed in exhaustive detail during the immediate post-war years. They are virtually identical to the tenets of the "Air Doctrine" published by the Italian General Giulio Douhet in 1933 - not surprisingly, since Douhet was an admirer of Mitchell and freely acknowledged his debt to the American. The same theories were expounded in dramatic form by Major Alexander P. deSeversky in 1941 in his best-selling book "Victory Through Air Power". Seversky, too, acknowledged Billy to be "the clearsighted and farsighted apostle of true air power" and "the human symbol of America's air age."³

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Gauvreau, Emile & Cohen, Lester, Billy Mitchell, pp.31-32.

³

deSeversky, Alexander P., Victory through Air Power, dedication page.

What, then, was the actual structure of America's air arm at the time Billy started his crusade? As we have seen, the very first aeronautical venture - the observation balloon - had been placed under the jurisdiction of the Signal Corps and had undergone experimentation as early as the Civil War. Carrying observers aloft was originally conceived as extending the "eyes" of the artillery, and was therefore entrusted to the service concerned with communications. With the advent of heavier-than-air aircraft, the so-called Aeronautical Section of the Signal Corps seemed, in military logic, the place to put this new device. Therefore, from 1908 until 1918 American military aviation existed as a small sub-section of a technical service, on a comparable organizational level with the carrier pigeons and the field telephone units. Thus was evidenced no interest whatever in the development of true combat aviation - a condition which might have been understandable during the pre-war years, but which was difficult to justify once World War I was in progress. Yet not until the United States had been at war for a year was the air arm finally taken out from under the Signal Corps and dignified by being constituted a branch in its own right.

The U.S. Army Air Service, as it was designated, came into being in April, 1918, as a new branch of the Army. Its members discarded the crossed-flags insignia of the Signal Corps and donned the new propellor-and-wing device of the Air Service. The new component acquired its own Chief of Service, Brigadier General William A. Kenly. It also gained its own rather limited procurement

authority. Organizationally this put the air arm on a level equal to the other technical services such as Signal, Chemical Warfare, Ordnance, or the Quartermaster Corps, but inferior to the combat arms, i.e. the Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery or Corps of Engineers. Due to its newness and small size, the Air Service was treated as something of a stepchild. The cautious General Foulais, not given to rash statements, complained in 1919 that the air arm had "less dignity and a lower status than that accorded the Dental Corps, Veterinary Corps or Army Nurse Corps!"⁴ Further, although an administrative organization was provided for the Air Service, no operational structure was conceived. Therefore Billy Mitchell had been obliged to improvise in France. In fact, there is no evidence of any official orders from Washington assigning Billy to any headquarters or unit other than A.E.F. Headquarters until the 28th of May, 1918.

Operationally, military aviation was assigned organically to the ground Armies and Army Corps, and air units were under the direct command of the Army or Corps Commander to whom they were attached. Thus air units would only be detailed missions calculated to further the objective of the local ground army. Even the large massed strikes on Fere-en-Tardenois and St. Mihiel, under Billy Mitchell's command, were one-time operations in support of major ground army offensives.

⁴

Levine, Op.cit., pp.174-175.

The concept of command of flying activities by flying officers was unheard of. Only a West Pointer who had progressed through the service schools and the War College could be assigned to the post of Chief of a Service. Consequently the air arm was headed in turn by General Kenly of the Signal Corps, General Menoher of the Cavalry and General Patrick of the Engineers. In fact it was not until 1926 that a flying officer, Major General James Fechet, was appointed to head the Army's air component. Air command was a theme that Billy Mitchell dwelt on again and again. He realized very early that the psychology as well as the methodology of the airman and the ground soldier were vastly different. In a lecture (undated) prepared for delivery to the Command and General Staff School he stated:

The psychology of the old ground armies, continued from time immemorial, is based on the psychology of the excited mob where the average man, either uneducated or untaught or forgetting all the higher elements in our civilization, throws himself savagely on his fellows. This is where the discipline of ground armies must be exerted. Physical brute force of the one must be exerted against the other. This is correct and just, in its proper place.

On the other hand, the psychology behind our aeronautics, which is based on the action of the individual far removed from his comrades, thousands of feet in the air and hundreds of miles from his frontier or coastline, a complete national unit in himself, his actions and conduct governed entirely by his mind, is an entirely different matter. The pilot in the air is maintained and supported by other men on the ground equally as important. These are airmen, not soldiers - mechanics from the factories and workshops, educated up to their duties and impelled that theirs is a new development in a decisive element.

This is one of the reasons why it has always been impossible to make air forces a part of ground armies - the psychology is absolutely and entirely different...⁵

Here, obviously, the technician is talking. Billy saw the air arm as essentially a force of technicians rather than a mass of troops. Organization and administration he regarded merely as necessary evils, which had to come second to operational considerations. How well his trenchant prose must have endeared him to his regulation-minded contemporaries may well be judged from a paper he prepared in 1922 on the subject: "The Making of Air Force Personnel".

Airplanes (he wrote) are not merely a means of transportation, they are fighting units. Air forces fight in line against other air forces. They use their own tactics, and have a highly specialized method of maneuvering in three dimensions. The air man's psychology of war depends on the action of the individual, he has no man at his elbow to support him, no officers in front to lead him, and no file closer behind him to shoot him if he runs away as in the case of a ground army....

To cover up their ignorance in these matters, these older ground officers have always hedged back to the fact that administration was the main thing in the conduct of air forces. Administration is merely the orderly conduct of correspondence in affairs. It has nothing to do with the actual handling or leading of fighting forces. It is merely a necessary nuisance. The best administrators usually are the old sergeants or clerks that have been long in the service. An excellent administrator could be obtained and hired for certain fixed wages in civilian life. An airman cannot be. 6

The subordination of army aviation to the ground commanders was a situation paralleled in the Navy. The naval air arm was distinctly a subsidiary of the surface fleet. As far as Billy was concerned, America really had no air power as such, but merely two separate and distinct aviation auxiliaries of the surface forces. Moreover, aside from the consideration of aviation, he was deeply concerned over the division of command between the Army and Navy.

Two distinct executive departments, each with its own Secretary, and with no unified command short of the President himself, Billy regarded as sheer folly. As early as 1912 he had testified before a Congressional committee urging establishment of a centralized department of national defense.⁷ This subject became almost an obsession with him during the post-war years.

Others, also, were interested in improving the military structure. In 1919 Benedict Crowell, the Assistant Secretary of War, personally headed a board⁸ which went to Europe to study the organization of the air forces of the various major nations. Particular attention was devoted to the newly formed independent Royal Air Force of Great Britain. On returning to Washington, the Crowell Board recommended a unified department of defense, with co-equal army, navy and air forces, virtually the exact organization Mitchell had been advocating. Admiral William S. Benson, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), was so incensed at these recommendations that he heatedly told board member Howard Coffin that he was wasting his time. He was right. In the face of the opposition of the Army-Navy Board and the apathy of Congress, nothing was done. The Crowell Board's findings were quietly filed away and not released to the press. Their general purport was defiantly "leaked" in December, 1919, by the freshman Congressman from New York, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, who had been a combat pilot in the war and had strong ideas on air power. The Crowell Board's proposals thus died, stillborn.

7 supra, p.25.

8

See Table 2.

An amusing sidelight of the Crowell Board hearings concerned the discontinuance of the wartime Naval Air arm. Billy Mitchell, testifying bitterly on this subject, had pointed out that naval aviation, a department in its own right during the war, had been returned by Admiral Benson to the jurisdiction of the surface agencies. The Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was questioned on this matter on the 12th of September, 1919.

Mr. ROOSEVELT: Now of course that testimony shows that General Mitchell knew absolutely nothing about the organization of the Navy Department. That is example number one. On the next page....

Senator CHAMBERLAIN: Before proceeding further, will you state wherein his analysis of the situation was wrong?

Mr. ROOSEVELT: ...No change has been made. General Mitchell says that we have distributed these (aviation) duties among six or seven departments. They were never (so distributed) either in the beginning or now. The Office of Aviation comes under the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations!

When later queried, Billy Mitchell had to direct the attention of the board to a Navy inter-office order, OpAir 084-307 dated 1 August, 1919, (more than a month before the hearing), titled "Discontinuance of Aviation Division". This directive closed out the Aviation Division and assigned its various functions to seven different sections, including the Bureau of Navigation and the Office of Gunnery Exercises. The order was signed by Admiral Benson.

TABLE 2

MEMBERSHIP OF CERTAIN CONGRESSIONAL AND EXECUTIVE BOARDS
CITED IN THIS PAPER.Executive Board on Air Force Organization - 23 August, 1919
(the "Crowell Board")

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Hon. Benedict Crowell | - Assistant Secretary of War (Chairman) |
| Howard E. Coffin | - Member, Council of National Defense (President-Hudson Motor Car Co.) |
| Henry C. Mustin | - Captain, U.S. Navy |
| Halsey Dunwoodey | - Colonel, U.S. Army Air Service |
| James G. Blair Jr. | - Lt. Colonel, General Staff Corps, USA |
| George H. Houston | - President-Wright-Martin Aircraft Co. |
| Charles M. Keys | - Vice-President, Curtiss Airplane Co. |
| S.S. Bradley | - General Manager, Manufacturers Aircraft Assn. |

Select Committee of Inquiry into the Operations of the U.S. Air Service
17 December, 1924 (the "Lampert Committee")

Florian Lampert, Chairman
 Albert H. Vestal
 Rudolph Perkins (Rep.-N.J.)
 Charles L. Faust
 Frank R. Reid (Rep.-Ill.)
 Anning S. Prall (Dem.-N.Y.)
 Patrick B. O'Sullivan (Dem.-Conn.)
 William N. Rogers

Special Board Making a Study of the Best Means of Developing and
Applying Aircraft in National Defense, Appointed by the President
30 September, 1925 (the "Morrow Board")

Dwight W. Morrow, Chairman
 Judge Arthur C. Denison
 Hon. William F. Durand
 Senator Hiram Bingham - Utah
 Hon. James S. Parker
 Hon. Carl Vinson (D- Ga.)
 Maj. Gen. James G. Harbord USA-Retired
 Rear Admiral Frank F. Fletcher USN-Retired
 Hon. Howard E. Coffin

(Data from the Mitchell Papers, Library of Congress.)

The United States Navy was, in Billy's view, as backward and tradition-ridden as the ground army. The Navy's devotion to the battleship as the "backbone of the fleet" was, he felt, just as unrealistic as the Army's reliance on the foot-soldier. He insisted that the airplane had rendered obsolete the large, expensive and vulnerable battlewagon. Naval aviation had thus far been limited to patrol and scouting functions, but Billy maintained again and again that no surface fleet could safely operate in an area within reach of land-based bombardment units. A few farsighted Navy men, notably Admirals William S. Sims and William F. Fullam, privately agreed with him, but so potent a symbol of national power as the battleship was not going to die easily. It was not just a matter of the imposing appearance of the battleship with its big guns. The vast naval shipyard establishments, the naval gun factories, the civilian steel industry, all constituted vested interests deeply committed to the battlewagon. The steel lobby and the legislators under its influence saw the controversy as a matter of life and death. The "blue water admirals" had been brought up in a tradition of capital ships, not flimsy aircraft, and almost to a man they vowed battle to the death against this upstart aviator. This particular battle, destined to be the most colorful of all Billy Mitchell's campaigns, was not going to make him popular with the military establishment.

The aviation industry was also involved in Billy's crusade. Airplanes were his life, his consuming interest, and he never lost touch with the men who invented, designed and built them.

Military needs could be met, he knew, only if the people who used the planes maintained close contact with those who made them. He particularly encouraged imaginative inventors and spent countless informal hours with them, going over the details of all kinds of new devices. Here again, though, Billy was the rebellious individual. By his devotion to the little men, the dreamers and unsung geniuses, he became more and more alienated from the big aircraft industry that had burgeoned during the war. He had reason for bitterness, as we have seen. The thousands of aircraft he had been promised on the Western Front had come through only a miserable trickle. His many recommendations had been ignored, and Billy attributed much of the resistance to what he called an unholy alliance between unscrupulous businessmen and venal politicians. Others apparently felt the same way, for in 1919 a Congressional inquiry was initiated to investigate the reasons for the failure of the multi-million dollar wartime aircraft procurement program. President Wilson appointed his 1916 rival, Charles Evans Hughes, to head this inquiry. Reams of testimony were taken. Billy Mitchell testified willingly and bitterly, but all for naught. The Hughes Committee accomplished little. Not until April, 1922 was its final report issued, and by that time public and Congressional interest had waned. In the report, Gutzon Borglum, sculptor and engineer, who was the chief investigator for the Committee, stated acidly, "There will be no convictions for this gigantic fraud and we will get nothing but a political burial of a crime of which Republicans and Democrats are equally guilty."

Borglum obviously found more satisfaction working with stone than with chicanery, as he went on to achieve fame as the sculptor of the Mount Rushmore memorial.

During the war, the government had directed that all aircraft patents be pooled, in order to facilitate rapid production and sub-contracting of aircraft and engines. Sound in intent, this directive worked drastically against the interests of the independent inventors. Aviation was new, and many of the existing patents had been secured by obscure pioneers who developed aircraft in backyard hangars and small shops. When the patents were pooled, the big organizations like Curtiss, Standard, and Dayton-Wright profited by their application. The "little fellows" without productive capacity lost out. Unaccountably, the patent-pooling directive was not terminated after the war, which explains partially why so few of the pioneer names in pre-war aviation in America continued to be prominent after the war. Many of Billy Mitchell's close friends were pioneers who had been financially ruined by this arrangement. One of them, James V. Martin, claimed¹¹ to have lost the rights to more than fifty exclusive patents. By taking up the cudgels for these men, Billy once again allied himself with the "outer circle", and alienated whatever support he might have had within the aircraft industry and its governmental lobbies.

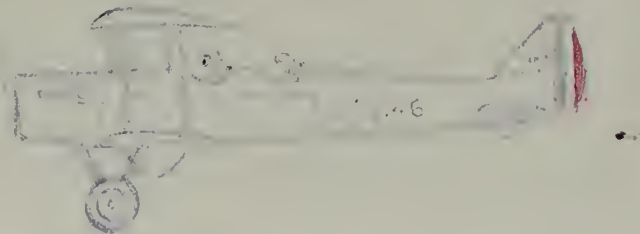
¹¹

Gauvreau & Cohen, Op.cit., pp.26-27ff.

Post-war Army aviation was dominated by the glut of wartime-produced aircraft, principally the DeHavilland DH-4. This airplane, of British design, had been produced in quantity by three American manufacturers. Ten thousand had been ordered. By 1919 almost five thousand had been built; the rest were cancelled. Only 196 had reached the front in France before the Armistice. The remainder were almost the sole aircraft with which the Air Service was to be equipped until 1926. The DH-4 was a mediocre airplane, neither as good as its builders had hoped nor as bad as its detractors insisted. It simply existed in such numbers that further progress was stymied. If the Air Service wanted funds for development of new aircraft, it was told, in effect, "You have plenty of aircraft!" As a result the Air Service inventory through the early 1920's was largely a tiresome array of modifications of the DH-4, from the DH-4B to the DH-4M, adapted for such tasks as night-flying, ambulance, crop-dusting or photographic work. The last of these rebuilt planes rolled out of the Boeing Airplane Company hangars in 1925.

The basic DH-4, as built by Dayton-Wright and the Fisher Body Company, was a two-place biplane powered by a 400 horsepower Liberty engine. Its top speed was 124 miles per hour, and it served as a ground-attack, observation, or general utility aircraft. It flew well enough, but it had had an unfortunate beginning, which gave it a reputation it never outlived. In the original design, unchanged until the period 1919-1923, the gas tank was located in the center fuselage, between the front and rear cockpits.

FIGURE II.



DAYTON-WRIGHT AIRCRAFT CORPORATION DH-4

(the "Flaming Coffin")

Successive model designations applied to DH-4 aircraft:

- DH-4 -Basic aircraft by Dayton-Wright, Fisher, and Standard.
- DH-4A -Modified fuel system.
- DH-4B -DH-4's with relocated fuel tank (see text) - 88 gal.tank.
- DH-4Amb.1 - One-litter ambulance configuration.
- DH-4Amb.2 - Two-litter ambulance configuration.
- DH-4B-1 -Enlarged main tank - 110 gal.
- DH-4B-2 -76 gallon leak-proof main tank (A Mitchell suggestion)
- DH-4B-3 -135 gallon main tank.
- DH-4B-4 -Airways version - 110 gallon tank.
- XDH-4B-5 Engineering Division experimental Airways version.
- DH-4BD -Modified for crop-dusting.
- DH-4BG -Smoke-screen laying configuration.
- DH-4BK -Night-flying version. Navigation and landing lights.
- DH-4BM -One-place transport-messenger.
- DH-4BM1 -Transport with dual controls.
- DH-4BP -Photographic - experimental installation.
- DH-4BP1 -Standard photographic configuration.
- XDH-4BS -Supercharged Liberty engine
- DH-4BT -Dual-control training configuration.
- DH-4BW -300 h.p. Wright H engine installed.
- DH-4C -350 h.p. Packard 1A-1237 engine installed.
- XDH-4L -Long-range version - 185 gallon main tank.
- DH-4M -Redesigned steel-tube fuselage.

Plus over forty other experimental configurations, undesignated.

(Data from U.S.Army Aircraft-1908-1945, previously cited)

When the plane was hit by gunfire in combat, or when it crashed on training flights, the fire from the tank gave the occupants little chance of survival. As a result, the DH-4 quickly acquired the sobriquet "Flaming Coffin". After the war 1,538 of these planes were modified by contractors to the DH-4B model with the tank relocated. In these the survivability increased considerably, but Billy Mitchell never ceased referring to the plane as the "Flaming Coffin" and blamed governmental disinterest for the many needless deaths in DH-4 crashes. He maintained, too, that other better designs could have been selected during the war, notably the American-built Packard-lePere LUSAC-11, of which only thirty were built and 995 cancelled after the Armistice.

Billy was always deeply concerned over the safety and well-being of his air crews. During the war he had agitated strongly for parachutes. After the war he managed to have them adopted. He also personally took a hand in the development of such forward-looking equipment as electrically-heated flying suits and droppable fuel tanks as early as 1919. The scratching for funds was always the real problem, though, and Billy was never silent in his quest for adequate appropriations. He wanted to build up not only the security of the United States but also the air industry itself - not for the sake of the industry but to advance the state of aviation in general.

CHAPTER IV

THE BATTLE OF THE VIRGINIA CAPES (1920-1921)

Billy Mitchell's campaign for the recognition of air power led to a number of bitter controversies, but the most spectacular by far was his project to prove the supremacy of the airplane over the battleship. This phase started in 1920 and culminated in the "Battle of the Virginia Capes" in July, 1921. Even Billy's most ardent detractors had to admit that this campaign was carried through superbly. The nation-wide publicity that surrounded it was certainly everything Billy could have wished. Of all Billy's accomplishments, this was the one whose fame would be most lasting. However, there was about the whole thing something of an element of Greek tragedy. This was the zenith of the protagonist's fortunes - his moment of greatest triumph. But it was a triumph that solidified the enmities of army and navy officials against him to the point where they would not rest until he had been silenced.

From the time he moved into his Washington post, Billy had been insisting that the battleship was obsolete - wonderful for a fleet review but useless for a war of the future. It was, he said, a mighty engine designed for surface warfare but helpless against attack from above. It could not elude or escape aerial attack, nor could it withstand the lethal effect of aerial bombs, which were more accurate and far more powerful than artillery shells.

It was characteristic of Billy that he was not content with merely trying to prove these points theoretically on paper; he would far prefer to demonstrate them by an actual test in the full glare of publicity. He had no fear of failure in such a test - he was utterly convinced he was right.

An opportunity loomed in 1920, when the Navy undertook bombing tests against the old pre-war battleship "Indiana". Billy sought permission for Army aircraft to be exercised against this target, but the Navy would have none of it. The only attacks to be made would be Navy dive-bombing tests, after which the target ship would be used for naval gunfire exercises. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker saw no reason for the Army to become involved in what appeared to him a purely Navy problem.

Here Billy was once again frustrated by the age-old concept of the division of military responsibilities between two agencies. According to established custom, the Army's responsibility ended at the coastline, and this boundary was assumed to apply also to Army aviation. The air-power advocates always maintained that an airplane, as such, had no interest in what was under it or on what kind of target its bombs were dropped. The fact that the foot-soldier could not fight at sea or a warship operate on dry land was no reason to limit the sphere of action of an air-borne weapon which could operate anywhere. This logic was wasted on the military authorities of the 1920's. As far as they were concerned, the Navy could shell shore fortifications and the Coast Artillery

could fire at ships but such was the maximum permissible overlap of functions. In point of fact, this limitation was destined to continue with little modification until the onset of World War II.¹

In 1920, in spite of its glorification of the capital ship, the Navy was becoming uneasy about the possible effect of aviation on surface fleets. A tentative step in the direction of ship-based aircraft had been made with the commissioning of the Navy's first aircraft carrier, a small, slow, converted collier renamed the U.S.S. "Langley". Admirals Sims and Fullam were predicting that air power would be the decisive weapon of the next war, but the "battleship admirals" considered such an idea heretical. The modern capital ship of World War I certainly looked invulnerable to the fragile stick-and-wire biplanes of that day. The admirals did decide, however, to try out their new dive-bombing tactics against the old "Indiana" under controlled conditions. The results achieved were unimpressive but vaguely disturbing. The dive-bombers were limited to small bombs, none over two hundred pounds, and their bombing accuracy was poor. Official observers reported with evident satisfaction that the "Indiana" remained relatively undamaged even though it had sustained a number of hits. Significantly, the results of the tests were never released or published.

A possible reason for the Navy's reluctance to publicize the results of the "Indiana" tests came within a few weeks. A British naval journal printed unidentified photographs of a

1

Huie, William B., The Fight for Air Power, pp. 69 ff.

damaged battleship, which Billy Mitchell recognized as the "Indiana". After closely examining the pictures, he released them to the American press, with an exhaustive analysis of the apparent damage. It was true, said Billy, that the battleship was still afloat, but it had been rendered useless as a combat vehicle. He pointed out that all electrical systems had been destroyed or rendered inoperative, the guns and turrets were out of action, the navigation bridge and engine-room telegraph were gone, the lights and ventilation systems below decks were out of commission, and the boilers themselves may well have been ruptured. He noted further that the "Indiana" had had no fuel or ammunition aboard, and that had the bombing been done against an active armed ship the damage would therefore have been far worse, since it appeared that the magazines had been penetrated. Had a crew been aboard they would have sustained major casualties, to the point of being unable to man fire-fighting parties. He scornfully refuted Naval attempts to dismiss the test as invalid due to the age and obsolescence of the vessel. The bombs used, he reminded critics, were only one-fifth the size of those then available to the Army Air Service. Moreover, the accuracy of dive-bombing did not compare with that of horizontal bombing. If the ship was obsolete, he maintained, so were the bombs and tactics.

Shrill controversy arose, although Billy heard sounds of support coming from surprising quarters. The retired Admiral Sims, who had been Naval Commander-in-Chief in European waters during

the war, spoke up in Mitchell's behalf, observing pointedly that "the average man suffers very severely from the pain of a new idea."² He urged the adoption of the aircraft carrier as the capital ship of the future rather than the battleship. Admiral Fullam predicted that "sea power will be subordinated to or dependent on air power."³ Admiral Bradley Fiske, noted naval inventor and ship designer, supported Mitchell's views. And from England came a crusty and surprising comment from Admiral Sir John Fisher, "Dreadnaught Jack", the great pre-war exponent of the big battleship. Said he, "There is only one thing to do with the ostriches who are spending these vast millions on what is as useful for the next war as bows and arrows. Sack the lot!"⁴

In spite of these individual sentiments, Billy got no support from his own service. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, irked by the whole controversy, appealed to War Secretary Baker to silence and rebuke Mitchell for sowing discord between the services. Baker readily did so.⁵ The "Indiana" story was put back under wraps.

² Levine, Op.cit., p.216.

³ Arnold, Op.cit., p.100.

⁴ Levine, Op.cit., p.205.

⁵ Ibid., p.206.

Not one to be rebuffed easily, Billy now drew aim on something bigger than the "Indiana". Under the terms of the Armistice, the Allies had been given a number of captured German naval vessels to use for experimentation and evaluation until July 31st, 1921 at the latest, by which time they were to be scrapped or otherwise destroyed. The group assigned to the United States included the submarine U-117, the destroyer C-102, the cruiser "Frankfurt" and the heavy battleship "Ostfriesland". The last was a veteran of the Battle of Jutland, and was considered to embody the most advanced features of naval design. Heavily armored and constructed with watertight bulkheads, it was one of the first naval vessels to be regarded as "unsinkable". The "Ostfriesland" had a triple-hulled construction as compared to the double hull most battleships then employed. This would be a tough target indeed, but the opportunity to exercise bombardment aircraft against it was too good to pass up. Billy Mitchell now devoted his most strenuous efforts toward arranging a bombing test against these ships.

Optimist that he was, Billy thought helpful changes might be ahead on the political scene. Though he was a Democratic Senator's son, Billy never evidenced much interest in politics. He was solely concerned with his field of aviation, and had a soldier's apathy toward the political arena. In view of his family's Democratic tradition, Billy intimated to friends that he privately favored the Cox ticket in the 1920 election, but he did not feel too strongly on the subject. The old Wilson administration had not

done much for aviation, and after his experience with Franklin Roosevelt in the Crowell Board hearings, he could not have been too pleased at his selection as Cox' running mate. Either way it would be a new regime, and Billy hoped for the best. As it turned out, his hopes were to some extent justified - the Harding cabinet was at first more inclined to listen to him. But Billy had not planned on Calvin Coolidge.

Between January and March of 1921, the "lame duck" period of the outgoing Wilson administration, Billy engaged in his last tilt with the old team. Testifying before the House Appropriations Committee, he pleaded for funds to build up an adequate air defense for the United States. He insisted that air power was the only realistic defense of the coasts, and pounded again on the theme that aircraft could destroy any ship afloat before it could come within threatening range of the coastline. His plea was earnest and direct.

"All we want to do is to have you gentlemen watch us attack a battleship ... All we want is a chance to demonstrate these things and have you gentlemen see them ... Give us the warships to attack and come watch it ... We are prepared to give you that demonstration now ... Tomorrow if you wish."⁶

This was a bit of Billy's overstatement again, because the Air Service was anything but ready at the time. But he did have the ring of conviction. Possibly because people were beginning to listen, Secretary Daniels exploded into print with one last blast. This whole proposal was ridiculous, he snorted. He offered

to stand bareheaded on the bridge of any battleship while such a bombing test was carried on, maintaining that any airplane would be "blown to atoms" long before it could get close enough to "drop salt on the tail of the Navy!"⁷

The national press had a field day over this statement. The Baltimore Sun taunted Daniels mercilessly: "It would thrill many a heart to witness the duel that he proposes, with Daniels himself at the ship's wheel. Even the cup races would pale by comparison with a dispute to the death in which the Secretary of the Navy wielded that awful engine of modern destruction, the warship."⁸ The New York Tribune, on a more sober note, termed Daniels' remarks "undignified and gratuitously offensive."⁹

Billy always insisted that he was not anti-Navy. He made no reported comment on Daniels' remarks. Moreover he told the House Committee he could understand the navymen's feelings. He candidly told the committee members: "The trouble is that we do not like to see things destroyed that we have been brought up to revere and protect; that is human nature and it is nobody's fault."

7

Levine, Op.cit., p.215.8 Ibid., p.215.9 New York Tribune, Jan.31,1921.

The battleship is looked on all over the world by all the navies as being the thing that must be glorified. We think we can destroy it; it is our business to attack it, and it is up to you to judge whether we can do it or not. Give the air a chance to develop and demonstrate what it can do!"¹⁰

The Congressmen on the Appropriations Committee were beginning to sound interested, an interest that both administrations finally came to sense. On February 7th, 1921 Secretary Daniels indicated that the Navy desired to conduct tests on the captured warships, and was willing to admit the Army to joint participation if it wished. At the same time a resolution was introduced in Congress, sponsored by two Mitchell backers, Representative Daniel Anthony (R-Kan.) and Senator Harry New (R-Ind.) directing the Secretary of the Navy to place certain warships at the disposal of the Army Air Service for tests. The Navy was alarmed. If there were to be tests, they must be run under Navy supervision and control. The thought of the Army Air Service conducting a test at sea against battleships was heresy. Before the resolution could come to a vote, the War and Navy Departments agreed to hold the proposed tests under the control of the Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet. The agreement was approved by Secretary of War Baker on February 28th, four days before the expiration of his term of office. Billy Mitchell was not bemused by the prospect of strict Navy supervision, but he was delighted that in one way or another he was to have his crack at the warships.

Billy's fortunes appeared briefly to be on the upturn in other ways, too. On March 1st, President-elect Harding let it be known, via inspired statements in the press, that he was in favor of creating a unified Department of National Defense, and that his prospective Secretaries of War and Navy, John W. Weeks and Edwin Denby respectively, concurred in this view. It was further intimated that the Army Chief of Staff, General Peyton C. March, would resign and be replaced under the proposed reorganization. Three weeks later Harding hedged on this suggestion. However he did indicate that he was interested in creation of a separate unified air service, and that his final decision hinged largely on the outcome of the forthcoming bombing tests, which he regarded as a test of the potentialities of air power.¹¹

Possibly the idea of the tests appealed to Harding's sporting blood. Like most of the American press, he saw the tests as a showdown for Billy Mitchell. In effect Billy had been called to show his cards - it would soon be seen whether or not he was bluffing. For Billy, then, the tests became a matter of life and death for his Air Service. If they achieved the success he hoped for, he might see the establishment of the defense organization he had been fighting for ever since the end of the war. He knew that the "battleship admirals" would view this as a matter of life and death too, and that instead of merely participating in a test he would be in the thick of

the fight of his life. All the more reason to suspect the Navy of trying to arrange the details and procedures to its advantage.

With mounting concern Billy watched the arrangements being made. It was clear that the Navy was not going to make things easy for him. The tests had been billed as "ordnance evaluation exercises", whose purpose was to determine the effectiveness of various types of ammunition. There was no ostensible intent to make a maneuver or war problem out of the exercise. Theoretically all Billy had to do was prove that his aerial projectiles and the Air Service's technique of delivery were capable of sinking the ships in question. He knew that the primitive aircraft and bombs available to him fell short of being considered real war weapons, but even with these limitations he felt he could do the job. That was, at least, until the Navy began setting up the ground rules.

All previous bombing of targets had been done in the sheltered waters of Chesapeake Bay, safely away from shore but close to the Navy's Norfolk base and the Air Service's station at Langley Field. For these tests, however, the Navy insisted that the target ships be anchored in deep water a minimum of seventy-five miles out to sea off Cape Charles, Virginia. By today's standards this distance does not seem great, but in 1921 the majority of the Army's aircraft were single-engined DH-4's. Even the heaviest Handley-Page bombers had only two 250 horsepower engines. None had radios or reliable navigation equipment. Not only were they ill-equipped and their crews ill-trained for

overwater flying, but in actual fact they had been legally prevented from becoming so trained by the Army-Navy policy of division of areas of responsibility. Flight instruments and overwater emergency gear were as yet unheard of. Now all these aircraft would have to fly more than a hundred miles over water to the target area, accurately locate the target, bomb it, and return over a hundred miles to Langley Field. Billy knew, too, that fog and poor visibility might well be a problem. If the naval observers could see the target ships from their surface vessels they would expect the flyers to find them regardless of visibility aloft. Any failure, Billy knew, would be a failure for air power.

The ground rules turned out to be extremely restrictive as to the bombs used and the number of hits to be allowed, particularly on the big target, the "Ostfriesland". As the Navy well knew, the Army's heaviest bombs at this time were 1100 pounders. The rules specified that the bombers were to be allowed only two hits "with the heaviest bombs". Further, they specified that the target ships were to be destroyed by naval gunfire or demolition teams in the expected event that they were not sunk by the aerial bombs.

Faced with this challenge, Billy Mitchell waded into the fray with characteristic imagination and thoroughness. The bomb business was a matter of the first importance. With the help of his personal friend, Major General C.C. Williams, Chief of Ordnance, he drove the aircraft armament division of the Ordnance Department

to rush the development and construction of 2000-lb. bombs, which were "in the works" at the time. These were to be the largest bombs in the world, and their development program was telescoped from what would have been a whole year to only three months.

Of course Billy needed aircraft that could carry these huge new bombs. The half-dozen old experimental Martin bombers that he had left over from the war were unusable for this, but an order had been placed for twenty improved MB2 bombers, each with two 420 horsepower engines. Again Billy applied the lash, this time on the Air Service Engineering Division and on the Glenn L. Martin Company, to expedite delivery of the new planes. As it worked out, the planes were delivered to Langley Field in ¹² July, just as the tests were starting!

Only highly trained personnel could succeed in these exercises, and here Billy applied his major effort. He started building his task force around the veteran Second Bombardment Group at Langley Field, the oldest bombardment unit in the Air Service. Into Langley, from all over the country, he brought the best crews he could find, then weeded them out until he had what he considered the cream. The force he assembled was designated the First Provisional Air Brigade and was composed of 150 bombardment and pursuit aircraft and over 1000 personnel. Through the months of April, May, and June this force worked as though it were at war. Battleship outline targets were bombed under all conditions of weather and visibility. Live bombs were used and scored by camera

on the hulks of the old battleships "Indiana" and "Texas" half submerged in the shallows off Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay. By constant practice, pilots became accustomed to flying over water when the horizon was lost in mist and the surface was calm, without becoming spatially disoriented. By the time July rolled around, Billy's Provisional Brigade was a finely-honed weapon, ready to get the maximum out of its machines. In an echo of World War I, Billy's enthusiasm was again mirrored in the high morale of his troops.

During the preparation phase Billy himself was always in the thick of things, personally observing all bombing practice from his little two-seater DH-4, the "Osprey". He frequently took his sister Harriet along with him on these flights, and from time to time would pass her notes, presumably commenting on what was going on down below. Unfortunately the public will remain ignorant of what was in these messages, because Harriet was usually so busy hanging on and bracing herself that the notes blew away in the slipstream.¹³

Billy had a theory about the bombing of ships, which he confided to his bombardiers although not to the Navy. Knowing the power of underwater transmittal of shock (a phenomenon he remembered from his childhood days when he would knock two stones together under water and hear the sharp concussion), he theorized that an underwater explosion close to a ship's side could be more deadly than a direct hit.¹⁴ With this "water-hammer" effect in mind he had

¹³

Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.237.

¹⁴ Mitchell Papers, Container 33, Library of Congress.

his flyers carefully rehearse bomb drops close to the sides of the targets. He knew that such "near-misses" would not be counted as direct hits under the Navy ground rules, thus their effect would be added to that of the two direct hits permitted. As it turned out, this proved to be a valuable dividend to the bombers.

In retrospect it is easy to say that the proper perspective was lost as far as these tests were concerned. Public interest rivaled that exhibited in a World Series, and the competitive aspect completely overshadowed the scientific. There was no question, however, that the publicity Billy always sought had been achieved, and he had a keenly interested nationwide audience. If his airplanes succeeded in sinking the battleship, or even if they failed, the nation and the world would know. This would not be a test whose results could be buried in departmental files. In an analogy President Harding would have appreciated, Billy was not afraid to show his cards.

On May 29th, just as the public appetite was being whetted to a sharp edge and military nerves were getting sensitive, the first of two untoward occurrences threatened the whole operation and Mitchell's career as well. On this particular day the air was prominent in the news. Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on the last leg of a record transcontinental flight, winging his way between Washington and New York as the nation waited for news. Meanwhile at Langley Field a massive aerial review by the Provisional Brigade had just been given in honor of a Captain deLavergne, the French

military attache. Late in the afternoon, as the visiting aircraft were returning to Washington, a widespread and violent electrical storm struck the area and caught several of the aircraft in flight, with disastrous results.

Billy Mitchell was returning to Washington in a single-seater Curtiss-built SE-5, leading two wing men, Captain William Ocker in a DH-4B and Captain Stuart P. Wright in a Fokker. The formation had a harrowing time getting through the storm but all three landed safely at Washington. However a large tri-motored Curtiss Eagle transport, flown by Lieutenant Stanley M. Ames and Colonel Archie Miller (Billy's old predecessor in Washington) and carrying five passengers, including two prominent civilians, Mr. A.S. Batchelder and Mr. Maurice Connolly, crashed near Indian Head, Maryland. All aboard were killed, setting off a hue and cry in the press and demands from Congress for an official investigation. This demand was superfluous, as an investigation was already under way. The inquiry did not reflect great competence on the part of the pilot of the ill-fated aircraft, Lieutenant Ames. In fact some of the testimony is amusing from the vantage-point of the 1960's. The French Captain deLavergne was questioned, as he had ridden down to Langley in this same aircraft with Lt. Ames as pilot. With Gallic discretion, he described the rather terrible landing Lt. Ames had made at Langley.

"The pilot landed perfectly", testified deLavergne, "but the plane did not land very well ...The pilot was certainly a very good flyer, undoubtedly ..."

"After landing, I did not see the pilot. I think he went away. We found him only for the return trip. I don't know where he went, but I am sure Colonel Archie Miller was not favorably impressed. He was always shaking his head in the plane. We were lost and we looked at the map. It took twenty minutes to get the right direction, and it is Colonel Archie Miller who found the right direction because the pilot had to watch the controls. He had no time to look at a map..."¹⁵

More significantly, Lieutenant Delbert E. Jones, weather officer at Langley, testified that he had not been able to get a weather report from Bolling Field (Washington) for two hours due to the condition of the commercial telephone circuits. He had no knowledge of the storm's direction. At this point the strident voice of Billy Mitchell was heard, bitterly blaming the crash on the non-existence of radio aids and military weather advisory services. He used the occasion once more to preach the need for an independent, unified air department for greater efficiency and safety. Mitchell's partisans took up the cry and even agitated for Mitchell's appointment as Chief of the Air Service. Billy's critics denounced him for trying to use a tragedy to further his personal ambitions. The extremists on both sides made the episode ridiculous. In retrospect it is clear that Billy was, as always, deeply affected by disasters suffered by his flyers and was quick to hurl accusations of blame. At the time official tempers were on edge, and Billy's superior, General Menoher, was furious, even before the second incident, a trivial one, made the situation worse.

During the big aerial review at Langley on the 29th, newsreel cameramen had been having a field day taking shots of fleets of airplanes, piles of bombs and cheering airmen. When their photos were published, prominent in one of them was a large bomb on which some wag had scrawled in chalk: "Regards to the Navy!" When Navy Secretary Denby and his admirals saw this they roared in righteous indignation, and their combined wrath was enough for the old cavalryman General Menoher. With no further ado he penned a curt memorandum to the Secretary of War:

"Major General Charles T. Menoher formally requests the Secretary of War to remove Brigadier General William Mitchell from office."

Coming as it did with no advance warning, this little bombshell put Weeks in an extremely awkward position. He shared General Menoher's uneasiness about the irrepressible Mitchell, and he deplored the inter-service rivalry that was being fanned continually by the press. However he knew this was not the time to suggest getting rid of Mitchell. The public had cast Billy in the role of David to the Navy's Goliath and was eagerly awaiting the denouement of the conflict. For the Secretary of War to relieve the challenger at this crucial point would be tantamount to political suicide. For two ~~days~~ Weeks agonized over the problem, and left Menoher's memo unanswered. Finally he decided to sample public sentiment by sending up a trial balloon or two.

First, in an article in the New York World, he inserted the gentle statement that "Mitchell has greatly annoyed the Navy

on several occasions."¹⁶ He noted no immediate reaction, but the next day he was quoted in the New York Sun to the effect that "all precedents of army discipline and service would probably cause him to accede to the request of General Menoher to remove Mitchell."¹⁷

This was the first intimation to the public that Mitchell's removal was even a remote possibility, much less that Menoher had requested it, and the reaction was immediate and violently indignant. A flood of telegrams from men's and women's clubs, aviation and veteran's organizations and from aroused individuals poured in on Congress and the Secretary's office. The press was highly vocal. The New York Globe on the 4th of June praised "the courage, energy and convictions of General Mitchell". The Times lauded him as "a brilliant, active, positive, outspoken officer, quick to take the initiative and assume responsibility."¹⁸ In the same article the Times reported that "several Senators are threatening to intervene in the controversy and are discussing the advisability of airing the whole subject on the Senate floor."¹⁹

This was quite enough for Secretary Weeks, who beat a hasty retreat and dumped the whole issue back on General Menoher's lap. It was up to Menoher, he intimated, to control his fractious subordinate. If this was beyond his capabilities he had better resign.

¹⁶ Levine, Op.cit., p.230.

¹⁷ The Sun (New York), June 4, 1921.

¹⁸ The New York Times, June 5, 1921.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Menoher withdrew his request for Billy's removal, and further announced that preparations for the tests would proceed as planned.

The end result of these tempests in a teapot was, of course, that more publicity had been achieved for the tests and that their complexion became more than ever that of a personal duel between Mitchell and the Navy. Billy knew that he was playing for the highest stakes possible at this point and that his whole career and the whole future of the Air Service would hinge on the outcome of the contest.

On the 21st of June, 1921, the long-awaited bombing tests got under way. Admiral Henry B. Wilson, Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet (CINCLANT), was in charge aboard his command ship, the U.S.S. "Henderson". With him at various times were dignitaries such as the service Secretaries, General Pershing, Senators and Congressmen and distinguished foreign observers. Billy Mitchell never set foot on the "Henderson" during the entire operation. Instead he personally observed all the bombing from his command airplane, the "Osprey". He was very much in evidence throughout the tests, and all eyes were on him as he circled the target area, occasionally making a low pass around the command ship and waving to the onlookers.

In proper dramatic fashion the tests started with the smallest target and worked up to the largest. The first was the submarine U-117. Naval seaplanes were to attack it with 163-lb. bombs, after which the Army was to be called in if necessary.

In this case the Army was not needed. After a total of twelve bomb drops in sixteen minutes the U-117 upended and went to the bottom. Many observers were shaken by the swiftness of the sinking, but this was only the beginning.

The second act was not a true ordnance evaluation. In this exercise the target was the old battleship "Iowa" operated by remote control. Naval aircraft were to locate it and bomb it with dummy ammunition. In this case the Navy's bombing accuracy was quite poor, only two direct hits being scored out of eighty bombs dropped. The betting odds now turned in favor of the battleship, and the old Navy hands aboard the "Henderson" began to breathe more easily.

In the third phase, on July 13th, Billy Mitchell's Army flyers put in their first appearance. The target was the former German destroyer G-102, and the attack was to simulate combat conditions, although the armament was limited to 300-lb. bombs. Mitchell first sent in a wave of pursuit planes which raked the destroyer's decks with machine gun fire. For the coup de grace, Billy had been saving a little surprise. With the flair of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, he sent in a full squadron of the new Martin bombers that had just arrived at Langley two days before. The Martins made one bombing run, dropped a salvo of forty-four bombs, and in only nineteen minutes the G-102 went beneath the waves.

The fourth phase involved the light cruiser "Frankfurt", a modern ship with low, sleek lines. The program called for ten

alternating attacks by Army and Navy aviation, using no bombs bigger than 600 pounds. The preliminary attacks dragged out during the day, the smaller bombs doing relatively little damage. By four o'clock the Navy started preparations to finish off the target with shellfire, while over the horizon lumbered six Handley-Page bombers with their 600-pounders. The bombers dropped fourteen bombs, several exploding alongside the hull and releasing their water-hammer effect. As the airplanes wheeled toward shore, the "Frankfurt" began to settle in the water. A few minutes later her stern rose high and she took the final plunge, as Navy gunners called off their preparations. Billy Mitchell commented later that he hated to sink this ship because she looked so graceful there in the water, "like a swan." 20

The last target was the big one, the mighty "Ostfriesland". Attacks started on the 20th of July and progressed with maddening slowness. On the first day bombs were again limited to 600 pounders, and the program was repeatedly delayed by boarding parties inspecting the damage. Several times aircraft were kept circling for prolonged periods and had to return to base for fuel. Tempers became frayed by frequent changes in orders and confusion over the order of events. Billy Mitchell later alleged that the Navy was deliberately trying to prevent the sinking of the battleship. 21 Whether or not this allegation was justified, it was certainly true that the events of the 20th did not look impressive to

20

Levine, Op.cit., p.241.

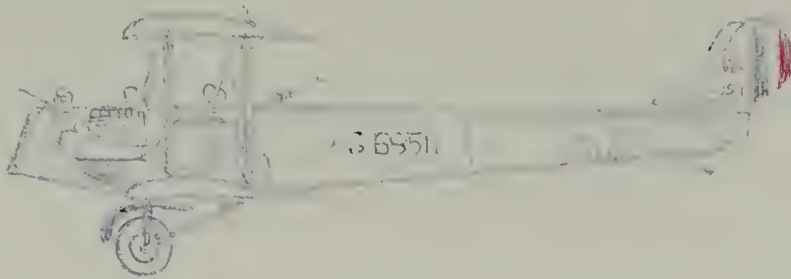
21

Ibid., p.243.

the observers or to the public. No serious damage had been done to the "Ostfriesland", and the press hastily printed headlines such as "Flyers Fail to Sink Teuton Battleship". Morale sagged somewhat at Langley Field, until Billy told his flyers that the morrow was the day that counted. General Pershing and Secretary Weeks, who had spent the rather dull day aboard the "Henderson", decided to forego watching the next day's events. Instead they spent a relaxing day at the Officers' Club at Fortress Monroe.

July 21st was to be the concluding day of the tests. Mitchell's flyers were to drop 1000-pounders first and were to be allowed three direct hits. The Navy insisted on the original ground rules, limited direct hits to two, and thus provided material for more acrimony later on. Of course the Navy was now aware that Billy had 2000 pound bombs available, and that their original rules allowed two hits "with the heaviest bombs". He was therefore to be allowed to make one bombing run with his 2000-pounders, after which the Navy planned to try to sink the target ship with gunfire from the U.S.S. "Pennsylvania". If this failed, a wrecking party from the U.S.S. "North Dakota" was to destroy the ship by attaching mines and depth charges to her hull. Obviously naval experts believed the "Ostfriesland" was next to unsinkable, and she had to be destroyed by the July 31st deadline. Arguments started almost as soon as the bombing began. Lieutenant Clayton Bissell led the first formation of Martins over the target and dropped five 1000-pounders in quick succession. Three of these

FIGURE III



NPS-1 Heavy Bomber of 1921 (Original designation MB2)

(by Glenn L. Martin Co., Curtiss Aircraft, and L.W.F. Corp.)

The Bombers that Sank the "Ostfriesland", July 21, 1921.

Specifications:

| | | |
|-----------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Wingspan | - | 74' 2" |
| Length | - | 42' 8" |
| Gross Weight | - | 12,100 lbs. |
| Engines | - | Two Liberty V-1460 (420hp each) |
| Range | - | 400 miles |
| Bomb load | - | 2,000 lbs. |
| Max. Speed | - | 98 miles per hour |
| Service ceiling | - | 8,000 feet |

(Data from US Army Aircraft 1908-1945, p.15.)

were direct hits and the Navy cried "Foul!" After frantic signalling, the bombers were called off the target and ordered back to base. Lieutenant Bissell, incensed, led his squadron past the "Henderson" and dropped all the remaining bombs, live, in the water. The terrific explosions caused consternation aboard the command ship, but surprisingly enough there were no protests. Possibly the observers appreciated having a dull day livened up.

Examination of the "Ostfriesland" showed that, although considerably damaged, she was still intact. Still fairly confident, the Navy sent word to Billy Mitchell that he was to proceed to the target with a maximum of three 2000-pound bombs. Billy sensed that this was a last-ditch attempt to prevent him from getting his two allowable direct hits, and he disregarded the order. He tersely informed the naval commander that his aircraft were on the way to the target and would continue to drop bombs until they secured their authorized two direct hits. Billy was after this battleship and everything that it meant to his Air Service. He was not about to let any ground-rule technicalities ruin his opportunity.

The final bombing of the great battleship was as dramatic as its buildup had been tense. With Billy watching from his little "Osprey", the formation of Martins and Handley-Pages moved ponderously over the target ship. Only six bombs were dropped. Of the first five, one was a direct hit and the others were in the water alongside. These were the "water-hammer" explosions Billy really wanted, and their force could be felt aboard the "Henderson". The sixth was a direct hit, and the bombing was halted at that point.

As the spray and smoke settled, the target ship could be seen, still solid in the water. For a few minutes Navy observers were sure she was unhurt. Then they noticed she was settling by the stern. Suddenly, before their unbelieving eyes, the dreadnaught lurched and rolled completely over, then dipped down under the waves and silently slid out of sight. She was gone just twenty-one and a half minutes after the first big bomb was dropped. As she rolled, her hull had been exposed to the view of all the onlookers, and the great holes where the water-hammer had crushed her plates were clearly visible. As if to emphasize the bombers' power to spare, the last of the departing Handley-Pages dropped an unused bomb in the center of the green swirl where the "Ostfriesland" had been. The detonation was almost a farewell salute.

According to observers, there were tears in the eyes of many old Navy men as the great ship went under, but they could not deny Billy Mitchell his moment of triumph. As he flew low past the "Henderson", his arm raised high out of the cockpit in victory, the command ship rang with spontaneous cheers. Resent him as they might, the navymen could recognize a spectacular job well done. As he had done so often, Billy had made good on his promise; he had done what he said he could do. Obviously aircraft could sink battleships, as he had insisted.

Emotionally, professionally, and dramatically, the 21st of July, 1921, must be regarded as the zenith of Billy Mitchell's career. He was the darling of the press. He was the young

challenger who had jousting with the champions and had won magnificently. He had proven his point in the full glare of publicity - he had shown what air power could do rather than just talk about it. He had once again shown that he was at his best when called upon to deliver, that he was a courageous fighter against odds. Professionally he had demonstrated his stature as a brilliant tactician, an imaginative technician, a superb organizer and leader of men. Unfortunately what he really wanted the public to understand - the capabilities of his Air Service, its planes and its men - was overshadowed by the hero-worship lavished upon him as an individual. He would soon find that this had been a hollow victory - a public triumph with no lasting result.

Billy and his men could sink the "Ostfriesland", but men, ideas and institutions could not be sunk so easily. It is frequently easier to make enemies than friends, especially when one is successful. Billy was to find out that he now had more enemies than ever before, and he now had ahead of him the fight of his life.

CHAPTER V

BILLY'S FIGHTING RETREAT (1921-1925)

The euphoria attendant upon the successful completion of the bombing tests lasted for a few days. At the working level hilarious celebrations ensued at Langley Field, in which Billy Mitchell joined with his elated airmen. Meanwhile accolades poured in from every side. Air-minded Navy men were quick to point out to their colleagues that a new ingredient had been indeed added to naval warfare. Admiral Fullam declared that the feat of the airmen "heralds the birth of a new weapon that menaces the old army quite as much as the old navy." Rear Admiral William Moffett, the new Chief of Naval Aviation, commented "We must put planes on battleships and get aircraft carriers quickly!" Navy Secretary Denby was more reluctant to draw conclusions, but he did publicly praise the courage and skill of the airmen involved.

Praise came from the Army side as well. General Williams, proud of the part that his Ordnance Department had played in the tests, called the exploit "an epoch-making performance". General A.P. Snow, Chief of Field Artillery, expressed his amazement at the accuracy, range and destructive power of the air-borne weapons. Even General Menoher, who had so recently sought Mitchell's dismissal, happily wired his troublesome subordinate: "You have made history!" Later he commented further: "A cold fact has been demonstrated ... that the battleship can be sunk by the aerial bomb."

Glenn L. Martin, basking in the reflected glory of his big bombers, exulted: "No fleet afloat is safe if it loses control of the air ... History is being made."

Most widely quoted of the comments was that attributed to Air Commodore Charlton of the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm. As an attache he had watched the tests and sententiously declared "Today a bomb was fired that will be heard round the world!"¹

The only sour note in this paean of praise was sounded by Denby's Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt Jr., who resorted to a characteristic idiom when he observed: "I once saw a man kill a lion with a .30-30 caliber rifle, under certain conditions. But that does not mean that a .30-30 rifle is a lion gun."²

Most puzzling was the attitude exhibited by the Secretary of War, John Weeks. Although it was his service that had been covered with glory by Mitchell's success, Weeks seemed unhappy about it. He maintained a brooding silence and refused any comment to reporters for a full day after the final sinking. Then, possibly encouraged by young Teddy Roosevelt's dissenting opinion, Weeks let loose a blast in a letter to the Editor of the Hartford (Conn.) Courant. Under the circumstances the unreasonable and bitter

1

Gauvreau & Cohen, Op.cit., p.171. Cf. Levine, Op.cit., p.260.

2

Levine, Op.cit., p.261. Cf. Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.272. Miss Mitchell erroneously identifies the Assistant as Franklin D. Roosevelt, as do several other writers. Franklin Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary during the preceding (Wilson) administration. See text, p.49.

tirade he poured forth was not only totally unexpected but also quite baffling.

"I'm not going to be stampeded by a circus performer" wrote Weeks. "Mitchell is putting a lot of foolish ideas in the heads of the people, and one of these days we may have to get rid of him. I stand by Pershing's opinions, which are good enough for me. He won the war without even looking into an airplane, let alone going up in one ... We'll stick to the army on the ground."³

It would be hard to find a more blunt and ostrich-like expression of the conservative military philosophy than this, coming as it did from the civilian head of the United States Army. One might well comment that Julius Caesar won wars without gunpowder too. Just what made Weeks so unusually bitter at this point is difficult to understand, but his attitude seems indicative of the hardening position of the ground officers and their superiors now that the challenge to their supremacy was becoming tangible. Weeks was not alone. In fact nobody at the policy-making level of the armed forces showed the slightest sign of encouragement to the Air Service in spite of the tests. Nor was another word mentioned about the unified services proposal Harding had hinted at some months earlier.

In the light of developments of later years, it is worth noting that some of the most enthusiastic praise for Mitchell's feat came from overseas. British Navy men were quite vocal.

Admiral Sir Percy Scott gruffly observed: " This proves that the capital ship is no damn use at all. The question is what is Lord Lee (First Lord of the Admiralty) going to do with his battleships? Have we any safe funkholes to hide them in?"⁴ Here again one might acidly comment that lessons are learned slowly: the "Prince of Wales" and the "Repulse", among other battleships, were built many years later!

Significantly, America's future Axis enemies were well represented at the tests. The Italian General Pietro Badoglio watched, took notes and said nothing. Under Il Duce, his country was soon to become notably air-minded, and 1933 would see a fleet of Italian naval planes cross the ocean as a unit. But there would be the "Cavour" and the "Roma", to be sent to the bottom in the next war.

Admiral Reinhard Scheer, commander of the defeated German Navy, instructed his countrymen: "The recent experiments in America make it clear that a battleship can be sunk by airplanes. Thus the airplane ... may be said to furnish better service than a large and expensive ship."⁵ Again, ironically, the next war would see Admiral Scheer's name on the stern of a new battleship which would, of course, be sunk by R.A.F. aircraft at Kiel.

Most interesting of all was the unguarded prophecy of the Hon. G. Katsuda, official Japanese observer at the tests. "It would be gravely embarrassing to the American people" said Mr. Katsuda, "if the ideas of your General Mitchell were more

⁴ Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.270-271.

⁵ Ibid. p.271. Cf. Levine, Op.cit. p.265

appreciated in Japan than in the United States. Gratitude is not one of the attributes of democracy." ⁶ The Japanese learned their lesson well, but it was apparent that old ideas died hard there too. They continued to build battlewagons, virtually all of which would be sent to the bottom of the Pacific, including the mighty "Yamato", the largest battleship ever built, sunk by American planes before she even had a chance to get into combat.

Yes, new ideas had been sown by Billy's success, but old ideas held grimly on. In spite of the trenchant comments of observers, the major nations of the world would continue to build battleships, bigger and better ones. The next World War, twenty years after the Virginia Capes, would see twenty-nine mighty dreadnaughts sink beneath the waves the way the "Ostfriesland" had, most of them victims, at least in part, of air attack.⁷

In the United States the official position swung more and more around to the theme that the Air Service's success had been luck and nothing more. For Billy Mitchell the bitterest blow of all came with the issuance of the report of the Joint Board of the Army and Navy relative to the results of the bombing tests. Signed by its chairman, General Pershing, on August 19, 1921, it summarized its findings:

"The development of aircraft, instead of furnishing an economical instrument of war leading to the abolition of the battleship, has but added to the complexity of naval warfare.

⁶ Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.270. Cf. Gauvreau & Cohen, Op.cit., pp.66-67.

⁷ See Table III, p.89.

Table 3

BATTLESHIPS DESTROYED OR SUNK IN WORLD WAR II.

| | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| <u>United States Navy</u> | Arizona | 7 Dec.1941, Pearl Harbor (air) |
| | Oklahoma | 7 Dec.1941, Pearl Harbor (air) |
| | West Virginia) | |
| | Nevada |) put out of action at |
| | California |) Pearl Harbor. |
| <u>Royal Navy</u> | Royal Oak | 14 Oct.1939 -Scapa Flow (sub.) |
| | Hood | 24 May,1941 -Atlantic (gunfire) |
| | Barham | 25 Nov.1941 -Mediterranean (sub) |
| | Prince of Wales | 9 Dec.41 -Malaya (air) |
| | Repulse | 9 Dec41 -Malaya (air) |
| <u>French Navy</u> | Bretagne | 3 July,1940 --Oran (air) |
| | Provence | 3 July,1940 --Oran (air) |
| | Dunkerque | 3 July,1940 --Oran (ran aground) |
| <u>Italian Navy</u> | Cavour | 1940 - Mediterranean (air) |
| | Roma | 9 Sept.1943 - Mediterranean (air) |
| <u>German Navy</u> | Graf Spee | 17 Dec.1939 --Montevideo (surface) |
| | Bismarck | 27 May 1941 -- Brest (surf.& air) |
| | Scharnhorst | 26 Dec.1943 - Norway (surface) |
| | Gneisenau | 1944 - North Sea (air) |
| | Tirpitz | 12 Nov.1944 - Norway (air) |
| | Adm.Scheer | 9 Apr.1945 - Kiel (air) |
| | Lutzow | 16 Apr.1945 - Kiel (air) |
| <u>Japanese Navy</u> | Hiyei | 13 Nov.1942 - Solomons (sub&air) |
| | Kirishima | 15 Nov.1942 - Solomons (sub7air) |
| | Mutsu | 8 June 1943- off Japan (sub) |
| | Musashi | 24 Oct.1944 - Phil.Sea (air) |
| | Fuso | 25 Oct.1944 - Phil.Sea (air) |
| | Yamashiro | 25 Oct.1944 - Phil.Sea (air) |
| | Kongo | 21 Nov.1944 - China Sea (sub) |
| | Yamato ¹ | 7 Apr.1945 - Kyushu (air) |
| | Hyuga | 24 July1945 - Kure (air) |
| | Haruna | 28 July1945 - Kure (air) |
| | Ise | 28 July1945 - Kure (air) |

1

The "Yamato" was the largest battleship ever built, grossing 72,300 tons. It was bombed and sunk by American aircraft while on its trial runs before entering service.

The battleship is still the backbone of the fleet."⁸

In the meantime Billy Mitchell had submitted his own report on the tests to his superior, General Menoher. Naturally his findings were diametrically opposite to those of the Pershing report, and called for a major program of development of the bomber force and for no further construction of battleships. Mitchell's report was quietly filed away. No one seems to know how, but on September 13th Billy's report suddenly appeared in the nationwide press. An editorial in the New York Times the following day intimated cryptically that persons "high in political circles believe there may be a housecleaning in the air service."⁹ Whether this hint was directed at Mitchell or at General Menoher is not entirely clear, but Billy entered the discussion publicly. He again brought up his demand for a unified department of defense, and charged that the Navy was blocking this necessary development.

Seeing controversy beginning to swirl once more, General Menoher decided he had reached the end of the road. Remembering the events of a few months earlier, Menoher went to Secretary Weeks and asked to be relieved unless the Secretary would back him up in disciplining Mitchell. Weeks adhered to his Pilate-like position, telling the old cavalryman that if he could not handle his subordinate himself, he would probably do just as well to seek another command. This was enough for Menoher, who resigned forthwith.

3

Extract report of Joint Board of Army and Navy, Aug. 19, 1921.
Copy in the Mitchell Papers, Library of Congress.

9

New York Times, Sept. 14, 1921.

Although there was some agitation for Mitchell's promotion to the top post, old Air Service hands considered this an impossibility.¹⁰ Instead, in an interesting echo of 1918, the War Department reached into the same file that General Pershing had used during the war, and came up with the same name. The old Engineer, Major General Mason M. Patrick, was appointed Chief of the Air Service, and Mitchell was retained as his assistant.

While this change of superiors was being accomplished, Billy was at Langley Field again, busily sinking another battleship, the old "Alabama" which had been headed for the scrap-heap. On his return to Washington, Billy found his old chief, General Patrick, installed in office. The two men confronted each other on a Saturday afternoon, October 15th. Billy was told in no uncertain terms that Patrick intended to be Chief in deed as well as in name, and that he intended to reserve all final decisions to himself. While Billy recognized this as a reasonable demand, he was keenly aware that Patrick was no flyer. He knew, too, that the older man had been placed in this job primarily to act as a checkrein on his assistant. Tired of chafing under the restraints imposed by ground officers, Billy told Patrick he would resign. The two went together to the office of the Chief of Personnel, Major General John G. Harbord. As luck would have it, Harbord was out of town for the weekend, and the two men had until Monday to cool down. In the interim Billy decided, for once in his life, to back down. He agreed to Patrick's terms and from that time on

relations between the two were relatively cordial. Patrick later admitted that Mitchell "had a better knowledge of the tactics of air fighting than any man in the country" but observed that he had "an undoubted love of the limelight" and that he "would lose¹¹ no opportunity to take a fling at the Navy."

Billy's term of office as Assistant Chief was due to run for four years from April 27th, 1921, the date of his reappointment. There can be no question that during these four years he was a troublesome officer, sometimes as welcome as a hornet in the staid circles of Washington officialdom. Even his own subordinates recognized this, and although they idolized the man they were at times embarrassed by his importunities. One of his staunchest supporters, "Hap" Arnold, writing in 1949, observed:

Billy had much in common with George Armstrong Custer and George Crook of Civil War days, or George S. Patton, Jr., of World War II - wonderful war leaders who have originality and are respected by their men, but who seemingly cannot get along in the regulation-controlled peacetime army...

Billy's youthful record in the Spanish War was beyond criticism. His World War I record was superb. As a leader, an air strategist, in employment of aircraft, he was unsurpassed. But - along with his fruitfully unorthodox imagination - his uniform was always a bit different from that of other officers; he couldn't wait for the normal routing of War Department procedures to get results, and he became a thorn in the side of not only the War Department, but of the Navy Department as well. 12

Coming from the only flyer ever to hold five-star rank¹³

Hap Arnold's comments are certainly a balanced appraisal.

¹¹ Levine, Op.cit., p.274.

¹² Arnold, Op.cit., p.107.

¹³ Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, although awarded a pilot's rating at age 49, is not here considered a "flyer" in the true sense.

Apparently satisfied that General Patrick was firmly in the saddle, Secretary Weeks took a further step toward restraining Billy. Tired of complaints from the Navy, Weeks concluded that it was "an unwise thing" to permit unrestricted inter-service propaganda. With this in mind, he specifically directed Billy "if he had anything more to say in print", to submit his statements first to the War Department for approval. This relatively mild stricture was later to prove a key factor in bringing Billy before a court-martial.

In December, 1921, the big word was disarmament. The Washington Conference was in session - Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes had made his dramatic proposal for the scrapping of warships. Looking back, it is not hard to see that the climate of the times was not a sympathetic one for Billy Mitchell's ideas on building up military forces. It is worth speculating that Billy's destruction of the "Ostfriesland" and the "Alabama" may have encouraged the administration to go ahead with its drastic proposals for reduction of naval armament - the thought may have been instilled that battleships might not be as important as people had thought. In any event, it was just at this time that Billy Mitchell was sent to Europe to conduct a thorough survey of foreign aviation developments. His place on the armaments committee of the Conference was taken by General Patrick. Whether Billy was deliberately packed off during this time cannot be proven, but the conference did go smoothly, and

the decision was made to scrap a total of sixty-eight capital ships, twenty-eight of them American.¹⁴ Further, two large battle cruisers under construction were to be converted to aircraft carriers (the "Lexington" and "Saratoga" of World War II fame). On his return to Washington Billy was gratified by the fact that no limitations had been placed on military aircraft. He observed ruefully, however, that the only such limitation¹⁵ was imposed by his own government.

During his European visit Billy had taken a hard look at aviation developments in Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany. He had conferred with governmental leaders and aircraft technicians everywhere he went. In Germany, so recently defeated in war, he was particularly impressed by the upsurge of spirit and creative vitality and the keen interest in aviation that he found. He returned determined to do all in his power to match this vitality in his own country.

During the next three years Billy pursued a policy of constructive development within the Air Service. While he could not resist an occasional controversial statement, he generally adhered to the strictures placed on him by the Secretary of War, and devoted himself to building up the capability of the Air Service and the public's confidence in it. Considering the primitive, financially pinched service he had to work with, the record was impressive.

14

Pratt, Julius W., A History of United States Foreign Policy, pp.524 ff.

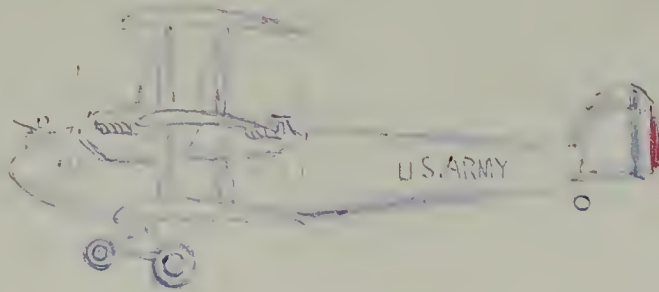
15

Levine, Op.cit., p.276.

Due to the glut of wartime DH-4's in the inventory, very little money could be had from Congress to equip the service with modern materiel. According to Billy's theories, bombardment was the heart of an effective air force, so he concentrated his efforts toward procuring a maximum number of heavy bombers. From 1920 until May, 1924, the Army Air Service was able to procure only 455 new aircraft, but of this total 113 were the big NBS series bombers designed by Glenn Martin and further produced by Curtiss, L.W.F., and Aeromarine. In September, 1923 these new bombers were exercised against the battleships "Virginia" and "New Jersey", slated to be scrapped under the terms of the Washington Conference. For the first time, heavy 2000-lb. bombs were dropped on these targets from 10,000 feet altitude. Both battleships went down, the "Virginia" in twenty-six minutes.

More imaginative but less successful was Billy's venture into the super-bomber category. Convinced that the desired range and load could only be achieved when the industry succeeded in developing a really big airplane, Billy backed the investment of considerable money in a mighty experimental aircraft called the Barling bomber after its designer. Not understanding the problems of aeronautical designing, many critics accused Billy of allowing tremendous amounts of money to be wasted on a spectacular flop. Actually a great deal was learned from this effort.

FIGURE IV



WITTEMAN- LEWIS XNBL-1

The "Barling Bomber"

Specifications:

Wingspan - 120 feet (15 feet more than Boeing B-17)
 Length - 65 feet
 Gross Weight- 42,563 lbs. (vs 37,600 for original B-17)
 Engines - Six Liberty V-1460 - 420hp each
 (4 tractor and 2 pusher)
 Design bomb load - 6,000 lbs. (did not materialize)
 Top speed - 95 mph.
 Chief failures were in range and altitude capability.

The Barling, officially designated the XNBL-1 (experimental night bombardment - long-range), was built by the Witterman-Lewis Corporation at Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey, and shipped in sections to Wilbur Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio, for flight tests. The aircraft was truly a monster. A triplane design with 120-foot wingspan, it was powered by six Liberty engines of 420 horsepower apiece, and its total gross weight was 42,500¹⁶ pounds. Unfortunately premature publicity led the public to expect great things of this bomber, and Billy himself was certainly the source of some of the extravagant predictions. The aircraft was test-flown for the first time on August 22, 1923, and it flew satisfactorily enough. Its extreme inadequacy showed up, however, when an attempt was made to fly it non-stop from Dayton to Washington. When loaded with sufficient fuel to make the trip it could not climb high enough to clear the relatively low Blue Ridge mountains and the trip had to be abandoned.¹⁷ It became apparent that the chief fault of the Barling was simply the non-existence of sufficiently powerful engines for it. The fact was demonstrated that adding more engines merely added more weight and the requirement for more fuel without a proportional increase in performance. This consideration loomed large in Charles A. Lindbergh's decision four years later to use a single-engined plane for his epic Atlantic flight.¹⁸ So the Barling gathered cobwebs in a large

16

US Army Aircraft 1908-45, p.15

17

Arnold, Op.cit., p.120.

18

Lindbergh, Charles A., The Spirit of St. Louis, pp.26-29.

hangar at Wright Field, and the Air Service had to wait twelve years until the development of a thousand-horsepower engine made an airplane of its size practical.

Aside from the ill-fated Barling project, Billy's ventures during these years were blessed with spectacular success. Convinced that the people had to be shown, he sought every opportunity to demonstrate the growing capability of airplanes. The record speaks for itself:

June 16, 1922 - World's high altitude parachute jump record - 24,200 feet, from an Army balloon.

October 18, 1922 - World speed record, 224.38 m.p.h., set by Billy Mitchell himself in a Curtiss racer.

November 16, 1922 - First mock warfare bombing attack on a U.S. city, Washington, D.C.

May 6, 1923 - First non-stop flight across the United States, by Lieutenants Kelly and Macready in a Fokker T-2, from Mitchel Field, New York to San Diego, California in 26 hours, 50 minutes.

June 23, 1924 - Dawn-to-dusk transcontinental flight, in a production Curtiss PW-8 pursuit - 21 hours, 50 minutes.

September 22, 1924 - Completion of the first flight around the world, Seattle to Boston, using Douglas WC aircraft, in 153 days elapsed time.

The "Virginia" and "New Jersey" bombings seemed headed toward another Mitchell-versus-Navy Donnybrook. The first bombs from 10,000 feet on the "New Jersey" had not been too accurate

so Billy sent in the lethal wave at 3,000 feet. The Navy objected, and another argument started. The War Department saw fit at this point to grant Mitchell an extended leave for a honeymoon with his second wife, the former Elizabeth Trumbull Miller. (Billy's first marriage had ended in divorce in 1922, presumably because Mrs. Mitchell did not enjoy the sensational publicity that continually revolved about her household.)¹⁹ In the course of this supposedly vacation trip, Billy typically volunteered to conduct on-the-spot inspections of installations in the Pacific, specifically Hawaii and the Philippines.

What Billy saw in Hawaii was enough to give him material for a 100-page report which he brought back to Washington, having left a copy with the Commander of the Hawaiian Department, Major General Charles P. Summerall. In the light of later events, Billy's reports on Hawaii and the Philippines must be regarded among his most remarkable accomplishments, although not so recognized at the time.

The Hawaii report pinpointed what Billy saw as the fatal flaw in the islands' defenses - the lack of coordination between the Army and Navy commands. He hammered away at this theme and also at the glaring lack of air defenses. In what seemed at the time a wild flight of fancy, he outlined what he considered the most likely type of attack that could threaten the islands. Such an attack, he wrote, would be one by Japanese aviation, specifically 100 airplanes, which would attack Ford Island, Schofield Barracks,

and Honolulu most probably at 7:30 on a Sunday morning. These aircraft could fly in undetected from the northwest and would put the fleet and military units out of action. He predicated this attack on a fast preliminary strike on the island of Niihau²⁰ and simultaneous reduction of Midway Island and Guam.

How accurate this prediction was can be clearly seen when one compares the details of the strike on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 with the details in Billy's report. The minor differences include the actual number of aircraft (110 instead of 100), their launch from carriers instead of from Niihau, and the reduction of Wake Island instead of Midway. Wake was not developed in 1924. Other minor differences are largely the measure of technical advances in the seventeen intervening years. One is almost tempted to wonder whether Japanese intelligence could have had access to this report, but this possibility has never been seriously suggested. It is more likely that Billy was merely viewing the Islands through the cold eye of a realistic enemy.

When General Summerall read the report he seethed. It was unsolicited, in his view, and while thorough, was "superficial".²¹ General Patrick attempted to smooth over Summerall's objections. Mitchell's observations, he said, would be of extreme value some years hence, but the art of aviation had not yet reached the degree of capability suggested by General Mitchell. Patrick certainly put

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Copy of this report in its entirety is in the Mitchell Papers, Library of Congress.

21

Ibid.

his finger on the problem, and never uttered a truer word. Of course, by the time aviation did reach the required state of capability, Hawaii's defenses were no more nearly ready than they had been in 1924. At the time, Patrick's reply appeased Summerall, but he still smoldered at the embarrassment he felt Mitchell had unnecessarily caused him.

In a similar display of seeming clairvoyance, Mitchell's report on the Philippines outlined, in 53 pages, the paths of attack that would be followed by the Japanese in the event they attacked the Islands, and detailed the inadequacies of the defenses. Seventeen years later the attack came as he had predicted, and the defenses were still no better prepared to meet it. Right up to the bottling up of the last defenders on Bataan and Corregidor, Billy had forecast the events.

Billy was particularly vocal in the 1920's in his evaluation of Japan as a strong potential enemy in the Pacific area. He was especially uneasy about Alaska, and the short airline distance between the Aleutians and the Japanese Kurile Islands. He had had private conversations with President Harding in early 1923. What was said is not known, but it has been speculated that Billy managed to communicate some of his enthusiasm for Alaska as a potential American bastion to the President. If so, it is conceivable that the problem of air bases may have been one of the considerations behind Harding's Alaskan trip in 1923, just before his death. ²² In 1924, however, Billy's reports to his

superiors went unheeded, and his public warnings about Japan were scoffed at. He was called a warmonger, "trying to make trouble between this country and its well-wishing, sincerely friendly neighbors."

During Billy's absence in the Far East, his chief, General Patrick, had been trying hard, in a "safe and sound" manner, to build up the case for air power. At his urging, a board of high-ranking officers, called the Lassiter Board after its chairman, Major General William Lassiter, had been convened to formulate a national air policy. The board found, predictably, that the nation's air arm was in dire straits and recommended a far-reaching program over the next ten years to build up the Army Air Service. It further recommended the establishment of an independent air arm for combat, in addition to the air units attached to the ground forces. Secretary Weeks approved the report of the Lassiter Board on April 24th, 1923 and sent it to the Joint Army-Navy Board. That was as far as it went. Despite the pleadings of General Patrick and of air-minded legislators like LaGuardia, no action was taken. In fact, it was not until March, 1935 that the General Headquarters (GHQ) Air Force was established, much along the lines of the organization recommended by the Lassiter Board.

When Billy returned to Washington in 1924 he was dismayed at the state of affairs. Having seen what other nations were doing in the way of air progress, he reached out in every way he could to make people understand the urgency he felt. In "Liberty" and

"The Sturday Evening Post" and in aviation periodicals, as well as in speeches and in official testimony, he pointed out the strides being made in military aviation by Japan, Russia and Italy, and under cover, by Germany. Within his Air Service he personally conducted inspection after inspection, and his reports are marvels of exhaustive thoroughness. In one report, that of McCook Field in Dayton in 1924, Billy went into every subject in the most probing and inquiring way. He explored and discussed personally with engineers the experimental work on aircraft armament and radio, and made detailed recommendations that they explore and develop such far-ahead items as catapults, landing-mats, liquid oxygen, metal wings, servo-boosted controls, aircraft diesel engines, and helicopters. Even at this early date, he knew the predilection of engineers for loading aircraft with "pet" contraptions, and in this report he emphasized the dictum:
 24
 "Performance must never be sacrificed for maintenance."

Work as he might, Billy was finding himself forced more and more into a fighting retreat. The climate of disarmament reached into the Air Service, as the War Department deactivated two squadrons and reduced three more to skeleton strength. Moreover the new occupant of the White House, Calvin Coolidge, seemed hostile to Mitchell from the very start. In personality, two men could not have been more dissimilar. An avowed exponent of disarmament and of economy, Coolidge had little use for aviation, and appeared to have an instinctive dislike for Mitchell. The

spectacle of Billy dashing all over the country in his personal airplane, "with speed written all over him"²⁵, did not appeal to the President, who regarded it as though he were personally paying the fuel bill. Billy, fighter that he was, felt that he had to speak up for what he believed was right. Coolidge, however, viewed Billy's free-swinging tactics with a jaundiced eye. Billy's more tactful and perceptive subordinate, the then Lieutenant Colonel "Hap" Arnold, reports this revealing conversation with Mitchell about this time:

"Billy, take it easy!" (pleaded Arnold) "We need you. Don't throw everything away just to beat out some guy who doesn't understand! Air power is coming! Calm down, Billy! Get a balance wheel in your office. Let him look over some of the things you write before you put them out! Stop saying all those things about the independent air arm that are driving these old Army and Navy people crazy!"

But Billy earnestly replied, "When senior officers won't see facts, something unorthodox, perhaps an explosion, is necessary. I'm doing it for the good of the air force, for the future Air Force, for the good of you fellows. I can afford to do it. You can't!"²⁶

The Teapot Dome exposures of 1924 were followed by wholesale shakeups in the Administration and by a rash of Congressional inquiries. Among the heads that rolled was that of Navy Secretary Denby, who was succeeded by Dwight Wilbur, a man with no naval experience whatever since his graduation from Annapolis in 1888. Mitchell caustically remarked later: "How Coolidge happened to pick that bird is one of the fascinating mysteries of his administration. He must have known less about airplanes than the peanut vendor in front of the White House." He told friends that Wilbur

25

Maitland, Lester, Knights of the Air, p.102.

26 Arnold, Op.cit., p.114.

reminded him of a story that was told about Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy. When first appointed, so the story went, Welles cautiously boarded one of the Navy's old wooden ships, peered into the hold and stepped back, aghast.
 27
 "My God!" he exclaimed. "It's hollow!"

About this time another Congressional committee was formed, with the imposing title of Select Committee of Inquiry into Operations of the United States Air Services, otherwise known as the Lampert Committee after its chairman, Representative Florian Lampert (R-O.) Its purpose was to probe the "air trust" allegations that had been leveled by disgruntled inventors, and to look into the whole picture of air power. The committee hearings became most involved and very heated, and indirectly greased the tracks for Billy Mitchell's removal from his position.

The hearings developed into a battle between the "Battleship School" and the reformers led by Mitchell and Admiral Moffett. It soon became apparent that their superiors objected to the candid testimony being given by these officers, and Congressman Rudolph Perkins (R.-N.J.) of the committee alleged that both Mitchell and Moffett had been threatened with disciplinary action for their testimony.

The issue of the freedom of military officers to testify before Congressional committees has been raised many times since 1924, but at that time it was a new point of controversy. Although

Secretary Wilbur denied that any threat had been made to Moffett, Secretary Weeks was significantly silent about Mitchell. Billy, characteristically, was anything but silent. Before the committee he accused certain witnesses of deliberately falsifying facts in order to discredit his testimony. He further insisted that many officers were afraid to testify, for fear of reprisals, and offered to name names if the committee desired. Later Billy amplified these accusations and ticked off the names of several highly-placed officers as having given false testimony. These included Army Major General Hugh A. Drum, Marine Corps Major General LeJeune, Rear Admirals Hillary P. Jones and Lewis Strauss, and even Navy Secretary Wilbur. He also named Admiral Moffett as having been afraid to testify fully. He submitted all these names in a communication to the War Department, submitted through his Chief, General Patrick, in reply to an official demand that he justify his remark to the committee.

In a final indorsement to this communication, General Patrick, showing considerable restraint, recommended to the Adjutant General that Mitchell be "admonished by the War Department for his attitude and his methods" and that he be cautioned against "the use of immoderate language in the future." The still somewhat sympathetic Patrick added in his concluding paragraphs the following comments:

7. I still think the charge that there were any intentional misrepresentations or efforts knowingly to confuse Congress is unwarranted.
8. While I can understand a measure of indignation on the part of anyone correctly informed, when confronted by

evidence so foreign to the facts as General Mitchell sees them, this does not excuse a charge of bad faith on the part of the witnesses.

9. I therefore recommend that General Mitchell's attention be called to the language employed by him, and cautioned that hereafter under similar circumstances, if they arise, he confine himself to a statement of the facts controverting such incorrect testimony and refrain from any assault upon the integrity of reputable witnesses. 28

Once again the press entered the lists on one side or the other. The majority appeared to side with Mitchell, and the New York Post coined the word "Mitchellism" to describe Billy's candidly rebellious approach. Admiral Fullan, from a sick bed, rose to Billy's defense with a remarkably sympathetic statement. He admitted that "the Navy in the beginning was at fault in precipitating a disagreeable and unpleasant controversy." Pointing out that Mitchell had been continually derided by high officials, he said it was only natural that he and his men would fight back. "General Mitchell" he said, "has done more to demonstrate the power of air attack against the forces of our possible enemies (italics mine) than the general board of the Navy and all the admirals of the Navy combined." 29

On February 19, 1925, reports appeared in the press that Secretaries Weeks and Wilbur had served notice on President Coolidge that they would both resign if Mitchell remained on the job. Although both denied this, the feeling persisted that Mitchell's days were numbered. The impression was well-founded.

28

3rd Indorsement, Office of the Chief of the Air Service, dated 11 Mar. 1925, to WDAGO (basic letter from Gen. Patrick directed by the Secretary of War) - Mitchell Papers, Library of Congress.

29

Levine, Op.cit., p.311.

For it was revealed much later on that on January 6, 1925, Weeks had sent a strong confidential memorandum to the President indicating his intention to drop Billy at the end of his four-year tour. Weeks ended his memorandum as follows:

...General Mitchell's whole course has been so lawless, so contrary to the building up of an efficient organization, so lacking in reasonable teamwork, so indicative of a personal desire for publicity at the expense of everyone with whom he is associated that his actions render him unfit for a high administrative position such as he now occupies. I write this with great regret because he is a gallant officer with an excellent war record, but his record since the war has been such that he has forfeited the good opinion of those who are familiar with the facts and who desire to promote the best interests of national defense.

Respectfully yours, 30
John W. Weeks

Thus was well expressed the reaction of the regulation men, the upholders of law and order, peace and quiet, to the presence among them of a too-persistent hornet. The public was not informed of the existence of this memorandum until it was read by the prosecution at the Mitchell court-martial late that year.

Secretary Weeks had one score to settle with Billy while he was still on the job. Billy had consistently maintained that anti-aircraft defense was of negligible worth in repelling air attack. The War Department was anxious to prove the opposite. Accordingly, a demonstration was arranged for the 6th of March at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, to test anti-aircraft defenses

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Memorandum to the President from the Secretary of War, 4 March, 1925 (inauguration day for the second Coolidge administration) Copy in the Mitchell Papers, Container 58, Library of Congress.

against attacking aircraft. Weeks wanted Billy to participate personally in these tests, feeling probably that a public humiliation was in order before Billy was dropped from his job. As it turned out, this invitation was not a wise move.

On the day of the public demonstration, everything came out as Billy had predicted. His aircraft flew slowly across Old Point Comfort towing sleeve targets, and the anti-aircraft fire missed them completely. During the night exercises, a typical Mitchell touch was added. While the searchlights and the new sound-locators were zeroing in on the aircraft formation, Billy had his unit throttle back their engines and drop into a steep glide in the dark. The locators and lights lost them completely, and a few minutes later Billy's bombers swept in silently across the beach at rooftop level, opened their throttles with a roar and thundered over the gun positions in a perfect mock attack.

This was Billy's last victory, and it finished him. When President Coolidge's new administrative team took office in March, 1925, General Patrick was reappointed as Chief of the Air Service, but Mitchell was not retained as his assistant. Colonel James Fechet was promoted to Brigadier General and appointed in his stead. In an undated memorandum written later in the year, Billy commented that General Patrick had recommended his reappointment. Further, referring to his controversial testimony before the Lampert Committee, he commented that the War Department had at that time said nothing whatever, had asked him no questions and had not cautioned him. "The usual Army tactics were employed,"

he wrote, " give a so-called radical enough rope and he will hang himself -- the only difference being that the War Department³¹ did the hanging."

Here, as often, Billy's tone seems that of a malcontent soldier rather than that of a senior officer. There is a decided ambivalence in his public statements, in that some are extremely selfless and high-minded and some sound simply peevish and self-pitying. Possibly the "balance-wheel" that Arnold had recommended would have helped. Possibly a psychiatrist might detect a trace of the schizoid personality in some of Billy's actions and utterances - so mercurial, so extravagant, so bitter, and at times so contagiously exuberant. Be that as it may, Billy's day in the sun as a policy-maker and leader was ended.

31

Personal memorandum in the Mitchell Papers, Container 58, Library of Congress.

CHAPTER VI

THE COURT-MARTIAL (1925-1926)

After his relief from duty, Billy reverted to his permanent rank of Colonel. Many writers, at the time and since, have liked to refer to this personnel action as a "demotion", which it actually was not. The general's star went with the job of Assistant Chief, and terminated with the expiration of the assignment. In most cases, however, an attempt was made to assign an outgoing staff officer to another position in the field calling for similar rank. In Billy's case this was not done. In fact, the humiliating part of Billy's reassignment was that he was not given any command post at all. Instead he was transferred to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, as "Air Officer" in the Headquarters of the Eighth Corps Area. This was a liaison assignment on a ground army post, with no assigned duties, and was obviously intended to be what much of the press called it, an "exile". This particular post became a favorite "Siberia" for air-power extremists in years to come. Billy's simple office at "Fort Sam" would later be occupied by Colonel (formerly Lieutenant General) Frank M. Andrews, and by Lieutenant Colonel (formerly Colonel) Hugh J. Knerr, banished under similar circumstances.¹

¹ Huie, Op.cit., p.154.

Although Billy's partisans in the fourth estate raised a hue and cry over the "exile" of their hero, others took a rather righteous and sanctimonious view. The New York Times expressed this side of the argument in an insufferably smug, unrealistic and characteristic editorial on March 7th, 1925:

...the argument that rotation should not occur in his case because he had shown ability and zeal as General Patrick's subordinate had no foundation ... His normal rotation would have caused no stir except for the publicity of the case ...

It will be neither humiliation nor punishment for General Mitchell to accept a detail to a flying field where his talents may have full play. (*italics mine*)

A good soldier obeys orders ... Mitchell's cause is a good one, but his methods could not be tolerated if discipline was to be maintained. ²

Although far from the Washington cockpit, Billy was anything but idle. Bidding his friends keep up the fight in official circles, he devoted himself to a round of speechmaking, writing, and meetings. He completed his book Winged Defense and sent it to the publishers, and did most of the work on his book Skyways. His friends in Milwaukee urged him to run for Congress, but he turned them down. In his refusal he stressed his conviction that the politicians were responsible for the military mess, and that he would have no chance if he were one of them. "The people will believe me, he wrote, "if I expect nothing of them." In spite of his parental heritage and his obvious popularity, Billy never manifested anything but disdain for the political arena. He liked popularity but he did not like to ask for it.

Six months of uneasy quiet passed in Washington and in San Antonio. Then on the 1st and 3rd of September, 1925, two events occurred which catapulted Billy on to the national stage for the last act in his controversial career.

On September 1st, a Navy seaplane, the PN-9 No.1, flown by Commander John Rodgers, went down in the Pacific and was presumed lost. The PN-9 No.1 had been part of a four-ship flight from California to Hawaii. The other three aircraft had turned back, and Rodgers had run out of fuel. According to many critics at the time, insufficient rescue ships had been provided for along the route and the mission had been inadequately planned. While sections of the press made accusations of mismanagement, a second and far more spectacular disaster struck.

The long arm of coincidence reached far out to frazzle the public's nerves this time. On Sunday, August 30th, the Roto-gravure Section of the New York Times had displayed an alarming photograph of a wrecked dirigible with the caption: "A Tragedy at Lakehurst - The Wreck of the Shenandoah - Only a Model".

Closer inspection showed the wreck to be that of a scale model of the great dirigible, a model that had cracked up in flight at the Navy airship base. The chuckles over this little joke had hardly died down, when only four days later real tragedy struck.

On September 3rd, the mighty dirigible "Shenandoah" itself, on a publicity tour of midwestern state fairs, crashed in a storm near Caldwell, Ohio. Its pilot, Commander Zachary Lansdowne, and fourteen crewmen fell to their deaths. As the airship broke up in

mid-air, Lieutenant Charles Rosendahl maneuvered the stern section as a free balloon and brought it safely to the ground, saving the lives of 27 men besides himself. Commander Lansdowne's widow bitterly alleged that her husband had protested against this flight and had predicted his own death. The crash was attributed to weather conditions which were unknown to the crew and of which they could not have been informed with the aids then extant. The dirigible had been dispatched far from its base at Lakehurst, New Jersey, with no facility to which it could have gone in case of emergency. The crew had no parachutes. It was alleged that half of the "Shenandoah's" relief valves had been removed "for reasons of economy". The airship, originally designed for the use of hydrogen gas as a lifting agent, was equipped with helium, safer from a fire standpoint, but only one third as buoyant, a factor which may not have been adequately considered in her conversion since her gross weight had not been changed. All in all, many questions hung in the air in the wake of the great dirigible's destruction. And for answers, many reporters turned to the man they considered America's number one airman, Billy Mitchell, in his exile at San Antonio.

Billy was silent for three days, weighing what he should do. The two tragedies were very personal to him. Commander Rodgers was his friend, so was Commander Lansdowne, and several of his crew. Billy felt every aviation disaster keenly as though it were a physical hurt, but this was more. These were his friends, and he felt the disasters were totally unnecessary. As he studied the

evidence available to him, Billy could only see these losses as being directly attributable to management of flying activities by ground people. "Dangerous idiots in power," he called them, "who have never traveled in dirigibles or airplanes." These³ were flying men, his kind of people, being sent to their deaths by incompetent desk officers. Silence was out of the question, Billy decided. He had to speak out.

At five o'clock in the morning of Saturday, September 5th, 1925, Billy Mitchell admitted to his office the group of reporters who had been impatiently waiting. He delivered a six-thousand word statement that let loose all the pent-up frustration and bitterness that he felt toward the defense establishment. In exhaustive detail he analyzed the PN-9 and "Shenandoah" disasters, then came through with his bombshell:

These accidents are the result of the incompetency, the criminal negligence, and the almost treasonable administration of our national defense by the Navy and War Departments.

Billy well knew the storm that this public pronouncement would stir up, and he was sure that he knew the consequences to himself. This was no personal vendetta on his part. As had been forecast by his remark to "Hap" Arnold some months earlier, Billy felt he had to shoulder the burden. He could afford it, he had said. He was, as always, desperately loyal to his friends. He ended his

blistering statement on this note:

The bodies of my former companions in the air molder under the soil in America and Asia, Europe and Africa, many - yes, many sent there directly by official stupidity and incompetence.

We would not be keeping our trust with our departed comrades were we longer to conceal the facts. ⁴

* * * * *

There was no doubt in Washington that Billy's outburst meant court-martial. The Administration had had more than enough. President Coolidge is reported to have instructed Secretary Weeks in so many words, to "do something about that buzzard!"⁵ Admiral Moffett, Billy's one-time supporter, was now in the unfortunate position of Chief of Naval Aeronautics, and he moaned with feeling: "I wish he was in Hell!"⁶ Moffett further denounced Mitchell as a man "of unsound mind and suffering from delusions of grandeur."⁷ The Secretary of War personally preferred the charges that were drawn up against Billy, and did so, as was admitted later, at the direction of the President.

Affairs in Washington were considerably complicated by the fact that just as the court-martial charges were being drawn up, Billy was scheduled to appear as a star witness before the so-called Morrow Board, a Presidentially-appointed board looking

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Mitchell statement, as quoted in the San Antonio Light, Sept. 6, 1925.

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Gauvraeu & Cohen, Op.cit., p.120.

6

Ibid., p.121.

7

Levine, Op.cit., p.331.

into the status of American air power. There was feeling that the Morrow Board had been designed as an instrument to squelch for good the recommendations of the old Lassiter Board, and also those of the year-old Lampert Committee. At the same time Billy was about to be subpoenaed to testify before the Naval Board of Inquiry investigating the "Shenandoah" disaster.

This last Billy managed to sidestep. On the advice of his personal counsel, Representative Frank R. Reid (R.-Ill.), he refused to accept a subpoena, on the ground that any testimony he might give could be used against him in his court-martial. Admiral Hillary P. Jones, President of the Board of Inquiry, vigorously challenged this contention. However, it appeared that Billy's move was a wise one. A senior member (unidentified) of the Army General Staff unguardedly remarked to a reporter: "If Mitchell had testified under oath, we could and would have used his testimony against him in his court-martial. But it's⁸ funny, isn't it?"

The Morrow Board was another matter. Billy was anxious to make his points before this group, but somehow his appearance fell flat. His testimony was long-winded and tiresome to many of the board members. Much of it consisted of a verbatim reading of his book Winged Defense. At one point, Senator Hiram Bingham interposed.

"Colonel, in view of the fact that each of the members

of this committee has a copy of your book and has read it..."

"Senator!" Billy cut in sharply, "I'm trying to make a point!"

Before the Morrow Board, however, Billy revealed many of his views on the recent disasters, and on the Administration's treatment of his recommendations. On the "Shenandoah" he observed:

...the sending of the "Shenandoah" across the mountains was, in my opinion, a direct violation of the law. The law states that operations from land bases shall be operated by the Army, unless attached to the fleet. The "Shenandoah" was not, certainly, attached to the fleet. If there was work to be done, it should have been done from Scott Field, Belleville, Illinois. The sending of the ship across the mountains, under conditions of that kind certainly should not be done by non-flying officers. 10

Regarding the PN-9, Billy came up with a rather remarkable example of his frequent extravagant statements:

..There is an airplane, the Army has constructed one, that could have been used, that can go for about 60 hours and for about 4500 miles and that airplane can be arranged to drop the wings in case of necessity to insure floating in the water. 11

Regarding the Air Service's state of training, he charged:

..Our bombardment has been stopped, the training of it; we have had no training with heavy bombs for two years. Our men are fed up with flying and they are disgusted with the work. Some of the men are up in Maine now shooting moose trying to get on their feet..

9

Arnold, Op.cit., p.120.

10

An interesting reversal of the old Navy dictum that only the Navy could fly over water. MJM

11

No specifications exist for any such airplane then or since. Moreover, the wings would help rather than hinder flotation. Billy may have referred to an Engineering Division proposal, or possibly to a conceivable modification of the Fokker T-2. MJM

Billy brought up again the accusation of coercion.

Captain James G. Moore of the Marine Corps had testified that "practically all flyers back Mitchell's proposal but do not dare to come up and say so."¹² Billy stated that there was indeed coercion, both direct and indirect.

"Right up there," he said, pointing to the spectators' seats, "is a representative of the General Staff with a stenographer, taking down everything I say."

Congressman Carl Vinson (D-Ga.) asked mildly: "That does not coerce you, does it?"

Billy laughed. "It does not coerce me, not a bit!"

After this exchange, Billy launched into a fervent appeal that people listen to him. Referring to the War Department, he said:

With regard to the number of projects that they have delayed, disapproved and about which they have never answered at all, I will not read them over; there are any number of them. It comes up every time. I do not think that any report that I have ever put in myself - not that my reports are worth anything in particular - but I refer to certain of my reports with regard to details of foreign service - and they have never received consideration at all by the whole body of our General Staff of the War Department. Individuals have considered them, but not the whole body. I have never been asked to come up there and explain them personally at all, never once. The thing has been shoved aside, put over, pigeon-holed and put aside. That thing cannot be done nowadays, gentlemen. It has got to be listened to and regarded because it is an important thing.¹³

On the subject of his unified service proposal and his criticism of the Navy, he pleaded:

We have criticized our step-sister services pretty strongly in this proposition. We do not mean any harm to them, but we want them to develop along their own lines, and to let

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Herald (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 8, 1925.

¹³

Mitchell Papers, Container 59, Library of Congress.

us develop along our own lines, and get together ... If there is any difference between us, let us have some fellow over us who will tell us to get together on this or get together on that. This is our whole proposition absolutely and entirely. 13

In general, Billy's tone before the Morrow Board was so querulous that it is probably not surprising that the board's findings were not encouraging to air development. The temper of some members of Congress was not encouraging either, although their public statements betrayed an abysmal lack of knowledge of the military and what it was doing. On October 14th Representative Martin B. Madden (R.), Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, testily blasted the armed services for "wasting money on experiments and technical research"¹⁴ And on the same date Representative John F. Miller (D-Wash.), addressing a Kiwanis Club gathering in Seattle, declared himself opposed to a unified service and a secretary for air "because the President, under the Constitution, is Commander-in-Chief of the Army and the Navy, and arbitrary power over any other department is denied him ...¹⁵ The President would have no supervision over the air !". Legalistic sophistry like this was not unusual at the time.

Billy Mitchell later dismissed the Morrow Board as a committee dominated by financiers and monopolists, and asserted

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See preceding page.

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Evening Telegram, (New York), Oct.14,1925.

15
Seattle Times, Oct.14, 1925.

that it "made no attempt to support any definite policy except¹⁶ to make money." Since the membership included the distinguished Mr. Dwight Morrow, as well as Senator Bingham, an air power exponent, Mr. Howard Coffin, formerly of the Crowell Board, Representative Carl Vinson and Billy's old associate General Harbord, this accusation does not ring true. It is true, however, that the board proposed very little of a constructive nature.

Before the hearings were finished, though, more vital concerns loomed on Billy's horizon. On October 23th he was served notice of the formal charges against him, and his final ordeal was ready to begin.

* * * * *

The American public, as reflected and as guided by its press, obviously had a hard time making up its mind about the prospective court-martial. Some papers, notably the Hearst press, were volubly pro-Mitchell, others were as clearly opposed to him. Some tried to take a position they considered fair, but many of these revealed appalling naivete in their opinions on the case.

A reflection of the confused but articulate press attitude at the time can best be gained by reviewing some direct quotations.

From the pro-Mitchell Chicago Journal, October 1st, under a banner headline: "THE ARMY & NAVY FUROR! THREE CHEERS FOR THE RED, WHITE & BLUE! ...If Colonel Mitchell makes good

his charges and then is severely punished for insubordination, the people will raise a frightful howl. The pussy-footing and side-stepping Wilburs and other bureaucrats would better keep out of the way of the propellor."

From the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 2nd, a cartoon by Ireland, shows an eagle labeled "Mitchell" asking a penguin ("Navy") and a rooster ("Army"): "Tell me, what do you birds know about flying?" The flightless birds are shown replying: "How dare you, sir? We've studied flying for years!"

From the Houston Chronicle, October 5th, a letter from J.M. Hutchinson, Houston aviator and editor, urging Mitchell's appointment as Air Secretary under a unified set-up.

From Hearst's Chicago Evening American, October 9th: "...While the head of the Army was watching the stock ticker in New England, Colonel Mitchell, in a flying machine, was watching enemy flyers and fighting on the ground below. The real jury in the Mitchell matter is the American public; and not Mitchell, but army and navy management is on trial before that jury."

From the Miami Herald, October 22nd: "This (the trial) is more good luck for the colonel. It will keep his name before the people ... The public is with this officer who has the temerity to criticize those higher up ... Colonel Mitchell is clever. He has forced the hands of the administration. If it failed to try him, it would be an admission of guilt. If it does, it will afford him more publicity." No explanation is given as to just what good this publicity would do Mitchell.

From the Tampa Tribune, October 22nd, a fantastically naive comment: "Bryan Mack recently, through the Tribune, suggested Colonel Mitchell as the next Democratic nominee (for President). The policy court-martial may make him that. And persecution by the administration, resented naturally by the people, will be very likely to elect him."

The South Bend News-Times, November 1st: "If the rule of silence applied to the army, then it can be applied with equal severity to every other department of the government ... The President is the accuser and the final judge, an inconceivable situation ... The trial may turn the tide for or against a bureaucratic government in the U.S."

From the Oakland (Cal.) Post-Enquirer, November 3rd: "If there were never any insubordination against official stupidity, what would happen to progress in the world?"

Cartoonist Reynolds of the Portland Oregonian sent Billy a copy of his cartoon of October 10th, with a penciled note: "Success to you, General Mitchell, in your efforts to oust all the 'Ivory-Domed Dodoes'. The country is with you." ¹⁷

William Randolph Hearst, in a letter to all his papers on September 10th, called for support of Mitchell's plan for unified armed services.

A substantial section of the press was directly and distinctly opposed to Mitchell. In spite of the personal sentiments expressed by its cartoonist, the Portland Oregonian editorialized

on September 8th:

It is common experience that no cause, however meritorious, is served in the long run by intemperate utterance ... If a good many of the statements he has made are true, they suffer the disadvantages of association with others which nearly obviously are not, and the colonel has sacrificed force where he has given way to spleen...A most difficult man to deal with, withal, since he has cunningly prepared the way for a martyrdom which can serve in no possible way to advance the primary purpose of the investigation (of the "Shenandoah")

From the Indianapolis Star, September 7th: "If they would do something specially drastic there is probably no punishment they could inflict that would be more cruel than to pay no attention to him."

The New York Times, adopting a more hostile position than it had taken in the past toward Billy, editorialized on September 11th:

If an officer can make charges reflecting upon the integrity of his superiors without being called to account there will be an end to discipline. The army will be in danger of demoralization. The first offender will have many imitators among officers and men ... and correction by court-martial will fall into contempt. There are elements in the country that would applaud such a condition in the army and make sinister use of it.

On September 14th, the Times commented "...he (Mitchell) may not be so sure as he has been that he is the one man in the world who knows all about aviation."

Straddling the fence on this knotty issue were a good many editors. Commenting on the welter of charges and counter-charges, the Dallas Times-Herald observed on November 11th: "That's what makes his trial so interesting to so many people. They would like to know who's right!"

In the same vein, the Duluth News-Tribune commented on September 9th: "He is either a hot-headed 'shootmouth' or a

patriot of rare moral courage, and the country is entitled to know which he is."

Finally, from the Washington Daily News of October 7th: "An autocracy like the old Prussia ... could simply issue the order and a smart military machine would spring forth. We have to wait on public opinion, notoriously prone to doze and mighty hard to wake. It sometimes takes a Mitchell to do it, dangerous as such episodes certainly are."

It was the semi-official military newspapers which were most guarded during the pre-trial period. The Army-Navy Register printed the entire text of Mitchell's "Shenandoah" statement without comment. In the ensuing weeks it presented Billy's testimony before the Morrow Board and the news of the forthcoming court-martial, again without editorial comment. On October 31st it ventured the following utterly non-committal statement: "...Discussion among officers of the military-naval establishment as to the outcome (of the trial) appears to be divided between two results." Behind the silence lay a certain amount of nervousness, however, which erupted in a strong editorial on November 14th. In this issue the Register took issue with an editorial which had been printed in the Syracuse Telegram. the Telegram had blasted the military, called the trial a disgrace, exalted free speech and suggested that the War Office should read the Constitution. The Register released its pent-up feelings in the following rebuttal:

For venomous expletive, concentrated ignorance and vicious diatribe there has been nothing to surpass this quotation in all that has been written and printed about the Mitchell case. For lack of truth, justice, ordinary common sense and plain decency this editorial might have been written, with advantage to its composition, by the village idiot....It was no friend of Colonel Mitchell who wrote in these pernicious terms.

The Army-Navy Journal maintained an equally reticent demeanor, with the exception of a rather righteous editorial on September 12th, in which editor E.B. Johns commented: "...Colonel Mitchell's usefulness to the Army, in the opinion of many officers who acknowledge that he has done a great deal in interesting the country in the Air Service, has come to an end. They have felt for some time that Colonel Mitchell should retire to civil life."

Most significantly, the Army-Navy Courier, a San Antonio publication, printed absolutely nothing about the Mitchell case from its start to its conclusion. Quite evidently the professional military people were embarrassed by the whole affair. From time immemorial they had preferred to wash their dirty linen in private, and they regarded the Mitchell business, with all its sensational publicity, as in decidedly bad taste.

* * * * *

While the charges against Billy were being prepared, and while controversy, vituperation and righteous indignation swirled in the nation's press, the spotlight swung for a few days to Omaha, where the American Legion was holding its annual convention. President Coolidge had been invited to address the convention, and at the same time Mitchell supporters were anxious to make Billy's cause a hot issue. Possibly to avoid embarrassing the President,

the Legion did not invite Billy. The press was caught in the middle. On October 5th the Omaha Daily News had headlined "IOWA LEGION TO BACK COLONEL MITCHELL TO THE LIMIT!" On the same day it was revealed that Billy had not been invited. The following morning the South Bend News wailed: "A Lost Chance ... Why not have Mitchell speak to A.L. Convention?"

Had any doubt existed as to the President's position in the Mitchell case, it was dispelled when he addressed the legionnaires on the 6th of October. Clearly expressing the pacifist, disarmament-minded sentiment of the time he said "Our people have had all the war, all the taxation, and all the military service they want."¹⁸ Without mentioning Mitchell's name, the President went on: "...that any organization of men in the military service bent on inflaming the public mind for the purpose of forcing governmental action through the pressure of public opinion is an exceedingly dangerous undertaking and precedent."¹⁹ It is noteworthy that Coolidge alluded to an "organization of men" rather than just one man. The implication seems clear that he associated Billy's inflammatory statements with the Army Air Service as a whole. After the President's speech the expected floor fight on the Mitchell issue fell flat, and the convention contented itself with an innocuous policy statement in favor of military preparedness.

¹⁸ Chicago Tribune, Oct. 8, 1925

¹⁹ Washington Post, Oct. 7, 1925.

By the 28th of October all had been made ready. The charges were drawn up and served on Billy and the court-martial was ready to convene. The charge was solely violation of the 96th Article of War, the so-called "catch-all" article. In substance the specifications alleged that in making the statements of September 5th and 9th Mitchell had been insubordinate and highly contemptuous and disrespectful toward the War and Navy Departments, and that he had therefore conducted himself to the prejudice of good order and military discipline.

Clearly the trial was to be concerned with military discipline only, and not with the truth or falsehood of any of the accusations Billy had levelled at the high command. Legally, air power was not on trial. It was simply a matter of an officer's having made public insubordinate statements about his superiors. Before this court it was apparent that Billy had little chance of acquittal, unless he could convince the court that the overriding importance of what he had to say justified the extreme statements he had made. At first tempted to act as his own counsel, Billy thought better of this and retained as his legal spokesman Congressman Frank R. Reid, Illinois Republican. Reid proved to be a remarkably tenacious and courageous defender.

As the time for the trial drew close, Billy found the opportunity for a public gesture that gained widespread favorable reaction. The magazine Liberty had awarded him a prize of one thousand dollars for "distinguished moral courage". This money Billy immediately turned over to Mrs. Zachary Lansdowne, widow

of the commander of the ill-fated "Shenandoah", to be used for
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 the benefit of the families of the lost crewmen.

At long last October 28th rolled around, and the courtroom doors closed for the opening session. Now it was no longer a matter of what the press or public thought. Colonel Mitchell's career was now in the hands of thirteen senior officers who took their places on the court. The selection of officers to sit on this particular court was predictable. A wildly misinformed article in some newspapers on October 5th had been headlined:
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 "Mitchell Demands Trial by Court of Flying Officers." In view of the fact that the Manual for Courts-Martial rigidly prescribed that all members of a court must be of equivalent or higher rank than the accused, and considering that only two flying officers (General Fechet and Colonel Chalmers Hall) were of equivalent or higher rank than Billy, this would clearly have been an impossibility. It was noteworthy, however, that not one member of the court was an Air Service officer, nor, as far as is known, had any one of them ridden in an airplane. The members were distinguished both by position and by military record, a point stressed by the War Department in its press release of October 20th, in which it gave
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 a military biography of each member of the court.

20 Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.314.

21 Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Oct.5,1925.

22 WD Press Release, The Trial of Col.Mitchell, Oct.20,1925.

In order of rank, the men selected to pass judgment on Billy were:

Major General Charles P. Summerall, Commander of the IV Corps Area, Governors Island, New York, and former Commander of the Hawaiian Department. General Summerall would later rise to the position of Chief of Staff of the Army.

Major General Robert L. Howze, Commander of the V Corps Area, Columbus, Ohio, and holder of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Major General Fred W. Sladen, Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York.

Major General Douglas MacArthur, commanding the III Corps Area, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland. Scion of a military family and destined to become Chief of Staff.

Major General William S. Graves, commanding the VI Corps Area, Chicago, Illinois.

Major General Benjamin A. Poore, commanding the VII Corps Area, Fort Crook, Nebraska.

Brigadier General Albert J. Bowley, Post Commander, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Brigadier General Edward L. King, Commandant of the Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Brigadier General Frank R. McCoy, Commander of the Third Infantry Brigade, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and director of Japan relief in 1924.

Brigadier General Edwin B. Winans, Post Commander,
Fort Clark, Texas.

Brigadier General George LeR. Irwin, Post Commander,
Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Brigadier General Ewing E. Booth, Commandant of the
Cavalry School, Fort Riley, Kansas, and the only member not
a graduate of West Point.

It is worth noting that the War Department saw fit to
assign five of its eight Corps Area Commanders to this court,
also the commanders of three of its top service schools, including
the Military Academy and the General Staff School. Beyond question
this was a high-level court and its members were most distinguished.
Obviously, too, all could be expected to be "organization men",
staunch supporters of regulations, protocol and "the system".
This was not a group calculated to lend a sympathetic ear to
Mitchell's harangues on air power, or to his treatises on the
technicalities of aviation.

In a last minute change the assignment of Trial Judge
Advocate, or prosecutor, was entrusted to Colonel Sherman Moreland,
with Major Allen Wyant Gullion as his assistant. The Law Member
of the court was Colonel Blanton Winship, who distinguished him-
self throughout the trial for his fairness.

The officially designated Defense Counsel was Colonel
Herbert A. White. However the defense was conducted in its
entirety by Congressman Reid.

At the outset the defense exercised its prerogative to challenge members of the court. General Summerall was challenged for cause, since he had expressed open resentment at Billy's inspection report of his Hawaiian command the previous year. General Bowley was also challenged for cause, allegedly because he had publicly referred to Mitchell as a "mountebank". These two challenges were sustained and the officers excused from the court. Exercising its further right to one peremptory challenge, the defense asked that General Sladen be excused from the court. Although no reason had to be given for a peremptory challenge, it is generally assumed that this action was prompted by a remark of General Sladen's that "no officer was worth the powder to blow²³ him to hell unless he was a West Pointer."

General Howze assumed the position of President of the court. The New York Times made editorial comment on November 5th that it considered the court "eminently fair" and that "more latitude was being allowed than usual in military trials." The highly proper Army-Navy Journal, on October 31st, expressed satisfaction with the "simplicity and dignity" of the proceedings, and observed that "the expected air of romance and dash about the trial is missing." Not everyone was so pleased. Congressman LaGuardia blurted incautiously in a public statement that "Billy Mitchell is not being tried by a board of his peers but by a²⁴ pack of be-ribboned dog-robbers of the General Staff!" Later

²³ Gauvreau & Cohen, Op.cit., p.142.

²⁴ Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.317.

when the fiery Fiorello took the stand in Billy's defense, this statement was thrown up to him. He only backed down to the extent of saying that he had not been aware that General MacArthur was on the court at the time he made his remark. In retaliation, Major Gullion sneered: "He (LaGuardia) is beyond my powers of²⁵ description. Thank Heaven he is sui generis!"

In actual fact, the "simplicity and dignity" that so impressed the Army-Navy Journal was largely attributable to the War Department's choice of a courtroom. In a conscious effort to de-glamorize the trial and minimize its importance and dramatic impact, the department chose the Emory Building, at 1st Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW, a ramshackle red-brick storage warehouse. The courtroom, devoid of a dais or permanent bench, looked more like a congested office, and there was room for a maximum of sixty spectators (most of whom were women, according to the²⁶ Army-Navy Journal).

To prove the specifications of the charge, the prosecution's task was simple. Billy had made a public statement which was undeniable. The defense, on the other hand, had to justify this statement sufficiently to remove from it the onus of insubordination, and this was not easy. Congressman Reid, armed with volumes of Billy's detailed data, stated what the defense intended to prove:

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Gauvreau & Cohen, Op.cit., p.185.

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Army-Navy Journal, Oct.31,1925 (Vol.LXIII -3245)

"As to Colonel Mitchell's charges of incompetence, criminal negligence, and almost treasonable administration of the national defense, we will prove that his opinion is not only well-founded but that his statements are true."²⁷

There being no clear legal precedent for this line of defense, the Law Member of the court had to rule on its admissibility. Colonel Winship granted permission for the defense to follow the proposed line of argument, and Reid proceeded to do so. Point by point, he ticked off the areas in which the alleged deficiencies would be shown to exist: the "Shenandoah" disaster, the PN-9 flight, the MacMillan Arctic flight, the defenses of Hawaii and the Philippines, the obsolete equipment of the Air Service, the "Flaming Coffins", and the refusal of the War Department to act on Mitchell's recommendations in each area.

It was this line of defense that made the Mitchell trial one of air power. The press took the view that if Mitchell's charges could be substantiated he would probably be acquitted. A parade of young air officers took the stand to back Billy's charges, every one at the risk of his own career. The list reads like a roster of America's air commanders in World War II: Henry H. Arnold, Carl A. Spaatz, Robert H. Olds, Herbert Dargue, Lewis H. Brereton, Harold L. George, Gerald Brant, Horace Hickam, W.E. Gilmore and W.G. Schauffler. Further color was provided by

the appearance of the "ace of aces" Edward V. Rickenbacker, who vigorously supported Billy's contentions. The retired Admiral Sims came to testify, and seconded Billy's allegation that the Navy put "ignorant and uneducated officers" in top posts. Asked if this applied to the current Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Eberle, Sims replied with an emphatic "Yes!"²⁸ The German Zeppelin expert, Captain Anton Heinen, was brought in and testified that ten of the "Shenandoah's" eighteen valves had been removed and that thus "the safety factor had been reduced²⁹ from one hundred percent to zero."

In spite of the vigor of the defense, it appeared that much of the technical testimony was neither impressive nor interesting to the court. From day to day the old line officers seemed, if anything, bored with the long-drawn-out proceedings; only one, General King, showed open hostility. Twice his audible comment "Damn rot!" drew protests from the defense and a caution from the Law Member. At times Congressman Reid's manner rankled with them. His proclivity for saying "You men" instead of "May it please the court" clearly irritated some of the august members.³⁰

²⁸ New York Times, Nov.19,1925.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ New York Times, Sunday, Nov.15,1925, Section 9.

The generals on the court were actually in an awkward position. Whether or not they agreed or sympathized with any of Mitchell's views (and there is little reason to suppose that any of them did), they were still Academy-trained professional soldiers. They were confronted with an open-and-shut case of belligerent insubordination. In retrospect it is hard to see how they could have come up with a verdict other than guilty. As higher commanders they were certainly aware of the tenor of a large segment of public opinion - they must have known that a guilty verdict would be unpopular. On the other hand, it was clearly brought out in the trial that the accuser in this case was no less a personage than the President of the United States. An acquittal would undoubtedly have cost many of these officers their high position and their chance of further advancement. They were thoroughly tired of the sensationalism surrounding the proceedings, and the Army-Navy Register undoubtedly reflected their attitude in some of its editorial protests against press excesses. Blasting a Washington Post editorial of November 15th, the Register fumed on the 21st: "The impulse to condemn officials as deliberate liars and cold-blooded murderers is perhaps to be expected of those who prefer, without molestation, to be driven into a frenzy by the sensational, of which there has been plenty of late..."³¹ A week later the same publication added, "...Certain generally reputable newspapers that have lately acquired a talent

for scurrility and slander are exercising that proclivity with the abandoned ardor of the yellow Hearst inflictions." ³² It went on further to flay Arthur Brisbane, whose highly emotional commentaries were adding immeasurably to the confusion of issues in the Mitchell case.

Sensationalism and emotion were not confined to the newspapers. In the courtroom itself the assistant Trial Judge Advocate, Major Gullion, had been demonstrating a fine talent for histrionics and invective. In his final summation, done in the best apocalyptic manner, Gullion compared Mitchell to Alcibiades, Catiline and Aaron Burr, and concluded:

"Dismiss from us this flamboyant self-advertiser, this wildly imaginative, hobby-riding egomaniac, always destructive, never constructive except in wild non-feasible schemes, and ³³ never overly careful as to the ethics of his methods!"

At length the long show was over. On December 17th the the court closed and went into executive session. Three hours later it reopened and General Howze announced the verdict: Guilty. For a punishment formula the court reached back to the days of George Armstrong Custer, and sentenced Mitchell to "suspension from rank, command and duty, with forfeiture of all pay and allowances, for five years."

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Army-Navy Register, Nov.28,1925 (Vol.LXXVIII -2366)

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Gauvreau & Cohen, Op.cit., p.184.

Billy's initial reaction to the verdict was characteristic.

For a moment he sat silent, as did everyone in the courtroom.

He was heard to murmur, almost inaudibly, the two words "Brass

ears!"³⁴ Suddenly he recovered his aplomb and exclaimed: "Why,

these men are all my friends!" Striding forward with a broad

smile, he shook hands with each of his judges, each of whom

responded with a warm "Good bye, Billy."³⁵

A decision in a court-martial is arrived at by secret

written ballot, the junior member handling the counting and

disposition of the slips of paper used in the balloting. After

Billy's trial had ended, while the crowded courtroom was still a

scene of confusion, an enterprising reporter from a Washington

paper made a dash for the wastebasket and gathered up the ballots,

which had apparently not been torn up. By comparing handwritings

he discovered that one member, General MacArthur, had voted for

acquittal. He rushed to Billy with the news. Billy was quite

upset by this impropriety, and sternly ordered the reporter to

drop the matter then and there. The news was not published,

although it became known to a few individuals, including Congress-

man LaGuardia. More than twenty years later, in a letter to

Senator Alexander Wiley (R-Wis.), MacArthur admitted that he

had, indeed, voted against the verdict of guilty.³⁶

34

Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.332.

35

Levine, Op.cit., p.368.

36

Lee, Clark & Henschel, Richard, Douglas MacArthur, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1952, p.45.

Dwight F. Davis had by this time replaced Weeks as Secretary of War, and in his command review of the trial he recommended that Billy's sentence be modified to the extent of granting one-half his pay and allowances "during the pleasure of the President." President Coolidge approved this modification, and on January 25, 1926 confirmed the sentence, further admon-³⁷ishing Billy publicly for "defiance toward his superiors."

Under a condition of suspension from rank and duty, Billy could do absolutely nothing in the service. Moreover, he would still be subject to court-martial if he spoke out of turn. Accordingly, on being notified of the confirmation of his sentence, he submitted his resignation from the Army effective February 1st, 1926, terminating twenty-seven years of service. His resignation was accepted with alacrity and undoubted satisfaction by the President. In less than a year's time, something had been done about that "buzzard".

Public reaction to Billy's conviction was mixed, but the loudest protest came, of course, from his sympathizers. The conservative Outlook adopted an I-told-you-so attitude, and opined on December 30th, 1925, that "the great majority of thoughtful and informed people are convinced that the maintenance of elementary order in the Army required his trial and conviction." On the other hand, the Literary Digest, on January 2nd, 1926, presented what it considered the consensus nationally, that "despite his technical guilt, Mitchell has done the country a service."

Approving the verdict, the New York Times nodded sagely and observed on December 18th that "the verdict is a vindication of army discipline, and the deliberation with which it was arrived at deprives Colonel Mitchell of the pose of martyrdom. The judges have performed an unpleasant duty fearlessly and honorably." It further suggested on December 21st that "the proceedings changed few, if any, opinions."

In contrast to this calm appraisal, Congress had an oratorical field day. Billy's defenders soared to lyric heights, comparing him favorably with Columbus, Servetus, Savonarola, Joan of Arc, Galileo and Socrates. Representative John L. Tillman (Dem.-Ark.) took to verse in his peroration:

So the struck eagle, stretched upon the plain,
No more through rolling clouds to soar again,
Viewed his own feather on the fatal dart,
And winged the shaft that quivered in his heart.³⁸

Congressman Frank Reid, Billy's counsel, bitterly reviewed the proceedings in a public statement released to the press on January 25th:

..This whole proceeding, from start to finish, the preliminary investigation, the preferment of the charges, the ordeal of the trial, the convening of the court, the conduct of the prosecution in court, the verdict, the sentence, the approval of the Judge Advocate General, the approval of the Secretary of War and now the President's quick action - shows that an invisible mind and hand have labored without ceasing for this day's verdict ...They have finally got (sic) Colonel Mitchell. ³⁹

38

Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.334.

39

Mitchell Papers, Container 63, Library of Congress.

In remarkable contrast was the resigned attitude of Billy's flying associates and closest friends. As "Hap" Arnold admitted later - "We all knew there was no other way - In accordance with the Army code, Billy had had it coming."⁴⁰

Probably as revealing a manifestation of military reaction to the whole episode was to be found in the pages of the current issue of the Army-Navy Courier, published in Fort Sam Houston, where the whole disturbance had begun. Here, where public interest in the Mitchell case could be expected to have been at its peak, this paper contained the following items in its issue of January-February, 1926:

An article on pioneer aviation, by Lt.Col.Benjamin D. Foulois.

An article on aviation medicine.

A monograph:"Aviation in National Defense" by Admiral William Moffett (!)

An illustrated article on naval aviation training.

An article "Aviation in the National Guard".

An illustrated spread on the new Air Service Primary Flying School at Duncan Field, San Antonio.

In the entire issue was not one word about the Mitchell trial, nor was Billy's name mentioned even once. In a foreshadowing of George Orwell's 1984 it would appear that in San Antonio military circles at least, Billy Mitchell had become an "unperson".

And back on his farm near Middleburg, Virginia, William Mitchell, civilian, listed his occupation as "Breeder of Horses".⁴¹

40

Arnold, Op.cit., p.117.

41

Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.343.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT DID BILLY MITCHELL ACCOMPLISH ?

¹⁸ [The public reaction immediately after the announcement of Billy Mitchell's sentence must have been most discouraging to him unless all he had ever wanted was personal publicity. ^{He had plenty vocal friends} Vocal friends he had aplenty, but these friends insisted ^{on} ^{supporting} championing his cause as an individual rather than working for the national defense goals that were Billy's real aim. In Congress his supporters were far more concerned, it seemed, in righting the supposed injustice to Billy than in fighting for his ideas.]

Fiorello LaGuardia was characteristically quick to act. On December 26th, only a few days after the conviction, the fiery New Yorker was urging passage of a bill to limit any penalty imposed under the 96th Article of War to thirty days suspension from duty. In alluding to this proposal the Army-Navy Register either erroneously or deliberately referred to its sponsor as "Rep. LaGuardia of New York - Socialist." ¹ Far more asinine was the joint resolution introduced by Representative Blanton of Texas, which provided for:

- (a) abolition of courts-martial in peacetime,
- (b) immediate appointment of Mitchell as Chief of the Army Air Service,

¹ Army-Navy Register, Jan. 2, 1926.

(c) suspension for five years of Generals Hugh A. Drum and Dennis Nolan of the Army General Staff (why these two particularly is not quite clear),

(d) reduction to half-pay for five years of Generals² King and Graves, members of the court.

That such nonsense could even be admitted to consideration in the Federal legislature would be depressing enough in itself, but this sort of extremism tended to cheapen and downgrade all efforts expended in Mitchell's behalf. Even the more positive signs of support were tainted with sensationalism, like the brief but shrilly proclaimed campaign to have Billy appointed New York City's Police Commissioner.³

Billy conducted himself with dignity. He did not keep quiet - indeed could he ever? But he refused to capitalize on his questionable publicity for political purposes or for personal gain. True, it appears that he insisted on substantial fees for personal appearances and lectures, and the New York Times took him to task, inquiring "Why does Mitchell demand considerable guarantee of payment before lecturing?...This will detract from his message."⁴ The Times was apparently forgetting that Billy's entire pay and allowances had terminated.

² New York Times, December 21, 1925.

³ Mitchell, Ruth, Op.cit., p.355.

⁴ New York Times, Feb.12, 1926.

Notably, in spite of the oratorical fireworks, Congress took no action whatever to remedy the conditions in the Air Service that Billy had deplored so thoroughly. A slight step forward was taken later in 1926 when the Air Corps was established and appropriations were granted for development of a limited number of new aircraft, but the improvement was more apparent than real. Moreover, the officers who had testified in Billy's defense felt the effect of departmental wrath almost immediately. All were either reprimanded or "exiled" to far-off or unimportant assignments, and their slow progress up the career ladder was stalled for several years.⁵ The affable "Hap" Arnold was hard put to maintain his aplomb when he found himself assigned to the Cavalry School at Fort Riley, serving directly under General Booth,⁶ junior member of the court-martial.

The Air Corps Act of 1926 gave the air branch an organizational status theoretically equal to the combat arms (Infantry, Cavalry, etc.) although on a far smaller scale. Aircraft were ordered and developed to replace the dreary parade of DH-4's, and model number designations of new aircraft multiplied like rabbits. Actual production of first-line planes, however, was another thing entirely. In the eight years from 1926 through 1933 a grand total of 2,496 aircraft of all types was ordered for the Air Corps. Of this total 771, or almost a third, were Army

⁵ Huie, Op.cit., p.28 ff. & Appendix)

⁶ Arnold, Op.cit., p.122.

Observation types designed to carry out a function that dated back to the Signal Corps days. A further 709 were training or utility-cargo types. In an eight-years⁷ period only 1,016 primary mission aircraft were ordered, and of these none represented a significant improvement in performance over their 1925 predecessors. The deadly weakness of the Air Corps from an equipment standpoint would be starkly revealed in the so-called Air-Mail fiasco of 1934, a near-disaster that did more to stimulate public support for improving the Air Corps than Billy Mitchell ever managed to⁸ accomplish.

The Air Corps-Navy feud was destined to continue with unabated acerbity. In 1937 two of Billy's defenders, then Brigadier General Arnold and Lieutenant Colonel Robert Olds, would participate in a mock bombing test off the California coast, a test with all the bitter overtones of the 1921 story. As late as 1939 the Commanding General of the GHQ Air Force, Lieutenant General Frank M. Andrews, would be demoted to Colonel and relegated to Billy Mitchell's little office at "Fort Sam", - for fighting too⁹ hard for approval of production of the B-17 "Flying Fortress".

Did Billy Mitchell, then, accomplish anything at all by his self-sought martyrdom? Certainly he brought air power, the new weapon, into the limelight, but he ~~had~~ already done that

⁷ See Table 4.

⁸ Arnold, Op.cit., p.145.

⁹ Huie, Op.cit., p.154.

without being court-martialled. Actually, the publicity that the trial afforded the Air Service was of a questionable sort. The bitter inter-service rivalry and unseemly personal squabbles that it brought into the open were hardly calculated to gain public confidence. Billy had done much more for his service by his outstandingly successful series of record-breaking flights and public demonstrations. The trial, as noted earlier, tended to focus the public attention on Billy the man rather than on the air power he sought. The aftertaste was bitter in the mouths of the members of the administration and the policy-makers in the Army and Navy. Moreover Billy had clearly alienated the sympathies of a substantial segment of the conservative press, a segment which had not been hostile before.

If Billy was primarily motivated by a desire to see the blame for the "Shenandoah" disaster placed where he thought it belonged, his actions resulted in complete failure. The official inquiry whitewashed the Navy Department completely, and its air chief, Admiral Moffett, survived in office. Ironically, Moffett was destined to perish later on in a similar disaster to the great airship "Akron", a disaster which would give rise to the same charges of Navy mismanagement.

Did Billy's martyrdom accelerate the progress of air power at all, or could it have? Or, conversely, had Billy been acquitted and allowed to continue his career, could he have done much more with air power than had been done up to that time? "Hap" Arnold thinks not, and his view should be worth something. "Despite

popular legend," he writes, "we could not have had any real air power much sooner than we got it."¹⁰ The state of the art was just not far enough along, in spite of Billy's optimistic preaching. Nor does General Arnold feel that the trial retarded air development to any significant degree. Much of public opinion was with Billy - he stimulated America's imagination. But imagination and public opinion cannot advance science overnight. There was no demand for, much less any real need for, a vast and costly crash program to push aviation development in 1925. Billion-dollar efforts such as were expended later on in atomic research or on ballistic missiles were not the order of the day in the 1920's and even the most rabid air power enthusiast would not at that time have suggested such a thing.

Up to the end of the decade of the twenties, air science was feeling its way. In spite of dreams and imaginative schemes, the key to development of aircraft potential is, and always has been, the power that can be extracted from an engine. The progress of aviation has not been a steady climb - it has been a series of plateaus with steep rises in between, and each of these rises has been associated with a breakthrough in propulsive power. It was the attainment of a 600 horsepower engine in 1927 that opened the way to a new generation of military aircraft, the 1,000 horsepower engine in 1937 to a further leap forward. The jet-turbine engine was a breakthrough of the first magnitude, and it may well be the perfection of rocket propulsion that may end the era of the piloted military aircraft as we have known it. Billy Mitchell

was stretching his wings in a day when the most powerful engine American industry could give him rated 435 horsepower, and as his experience with the Barling bomber showed, one can only do so much with that kind of power. As Arnold said, "People have become so used to saying that Billy Mitchell was ahead of his¹¹ time that they sometimes forget it is true."

What about the speed, altitude and endurance records achieved by Billy's fledgling Air Service? These, unfortunately, were rather tributes to the skill, daring and ingenuity of the rather remarkable pilots in Billy's coterie than demonstrations of the capability of the aircraft of the twenties. In a perverse sort of way, they blunted the point of some of Billy's contentions that the airplanes he had were no good. Billy himself cavorted all over the country in his own DH-4, one of his notorious "Flaming Coffins", and he made it look good!

Rather than any of the foregoing, it seems clear that Billy's most urgent goal and demanding obsession was the reorganization of the defense establishment. From 1919 until his death in 1936 he pounded continually on this theme, one which in light of later developments proved to be based on solid ground. The question whether the air service of the 1920's would have profited by being independent of domination by the ground forces is one for speculation and argument. However the British experience with the

¹¹
Arnold, Op.cit., p.122.

Royal Air Force would suggest that it might have been successful, especially if the independent air arm had been joined with the Army and the Navy under a unified defense arrangement, which was not adopted in Britain. On the other hand, it has been pointed out, with some truth, that the Royal Air Force, in 1938, was not significantly further ahead than the U.S. Army Air Corps. The amazing performance of the R.A.F. in the "Battle of Britain" was actually a heroic response to a life-or-death challenge, a triumph by dedicated men working with a marginally adequate force. The peacetime growth of the R.A.F. gave no inkling of its capability to develop under the stimulus of war. And this same observation could well have been made of the American air arm after Pearl Harbor.

An integrated military air establishment is essentially built around a bombardment weapon. In retrospect it becomes evident that Billy Mitchell was merely the first in a series of air specialists to fight for such a force. Billy fought for adequate appropriations, support and development to build an air force around the best bombardment weapon of his time, the Martin NBS-1. Succeeding struggles of the air power exponents were centered successively on new stages of bomber evolution. Andrews and Knerr sacrificed themselves in the fight for the Boeing B-17, the first high-altitude, long-range bomber. The next stage, the B-29, was achieved without a struggle because of the exigencies of war. Later, however, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg laid his career on the line in an all-out fight with the Navy

and certain elements of Congress to gain approval for the strategic force of intercontinental B-36's. In the 1960's General Curtis E. LeMay has fought what seems to have been a losing battle for the Mach.3 bomber, the B-70.

In comparison with the controversies his successors became involved in, Billy's proposals were unrealistic in one major respect. He was campaigning for a kind of air power based on machines that did not yet exist, where his successors fought for production of designs, experimental models of which were already flying. An Air Force built around Martins would not have had the capability Billy was talking about. To that extent Billy was a visionary, "ahead of his time", a far-seeing prophet who tended to be too impatient with the present. He refused to keep in step with the conservative military leaders of his day; instead he insisted on being an individual, a daring adventurer, a bull in a china shop, which made him anathema to his academy-trained contemporaries.

It has been said that World War II vindicated Mitchell. It did, in the sense that his strategic ideas were proved to be true. His warnings about America's inadequate defenses were certainly justified. The later "eleventh-hour prophets", Douhet and deSeversky, emphasized this point. World War II saw Mitchell's name given to a highly effective medium bomber, the B-25. And after the war Congress saw fit to restore Billy's name posthumously to the honorably retired list, setting aside the verdict of the 1925 court-martial. But this was mainly a reflection of a

changed climate of opinion. The holocaust of World War II had made people remember the man who had predicted it fifteen and more years earlier. In effect, it was history that had caught up with Billy, a man born fifteen years too soon.

In 1942, Major deSeversky, writing in, of all magazines, Vogue, reminded his readers that Mitchell had been "able to see far beyond the technical limitations of his day ...Orthodox military leaders ...treat existing air weapons as though they were fixed and finished."¹² By way of a striking parallel, the Italian General Giulio Douhet, early in World War I had publicly criticized the army plan of campaign, for which he was court-martialled and given a year in jail. After the disaster of Caporetto vindicated his judgment,¹³ he was released.

In summary it can be said that Billy Mitchell felt such a terrible sense of urgency that for him tomorrow was today. He was a brilliant technician and an utterly fearless soldier, but his sense of duty was an intensely personal one between him and his country. An unusually successful organizer of teamwork and an inspiring leader, he himself could not work in harness. While his subordinates idolized him, his superiors regarded him with feelings ranging from uneasiness to downright hostility. It has been said that there is no room for prima donnas in the military

¹² Vogue, Oct.15,1942.

¹³ Herald-Tribune, (New York) March 1, 1936.

service, and according to the rulebook this is true. Yet it is frequently hard to distinguish the genius from the prima donna. In Billy's case it was the prima donna that was court-martialed and the genius that was sacrificed. The cantankerous rebel was put in his place, but the prophet lived on to become the human symbol of America's air age."¹⁴

¹⁴deSeversky, Op.cit., Dedication page.

TABLE 4

(1)

AIR CORPS AIRCRAFT ORDERED BETWEEN 1926 and 1933I. Primary Mission Aircraft:

(Total -1,016)

| | |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Pursuit - Curtiss P-1 | - 93 |
| Curtiss P-2 | - 5 |
| Curtiss P-3 | - 5 |
| Curtiss YP-5 | - 5 |
| Curtiss P-6 | - 64 |
| Boeing P-12 | - 366 |
| Berliner-Joyce B-16 | - 25 |
| Total | <u>563</u> |

| | |
|----------------------|------------|
| Attack - Curtiss A-3 | - 154 |
| Curtiss YA-8 | - 12 |
| Curtiss A-12 | - 46 |
| Total | <u>212</u> |

| | |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Bombers - Keystone LB's | - 82 |
| Keystone B-3,4,5- | 88 |
| Curtiss B-2 | - 13 |
| Keystone B-6 | - 44 |
| * Martin YB-10 | - 14 |
| Total | <u>159</u> |

* The B-10 was the only modern aircraft ordered during this period, and it was not mass-produced until 1934.

II. Auxiliary Aircraft:

(Total - 709)

| | |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| Primary Trainers (PT-3 to PT-11) | - 303 |
| Basic Trainers (BT-1 & BT-2) | - 217 |
| Advanced trainers (AT-1,4 & 5) | - 76 |
| Total | <u>596</u> |

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| Miscellaneous Cargo Types | 113 |
|---------------------------|-----|

III. Army Observation Aircraft:

(Total - 771)

| | | | |
|--------------------|-------|-------------------|------------|
| Curtiss O-1 | - 74 | Fokker YO-27 | - 14 |
| Douglas O-2 | - 196 | Douglas YO-31 | - 13 |
| Douglas O-5 | - 5 | Douglas YO-35,36- | 6 |
| Thomas Morse O-6 | - 6 | Douglas O-38 | - 156 |
| Douglas O-7 | - 3 | * Loening OA-1 | - 45 |
| Curtiss O-11 | - 66 | * Loening OA-2 | - 9 |
| Consolidated O-17- | 29 | Total | <u>771</u> |
| Thomas Morse O-19- | 176 | | |
| Douglas O-25 | - 83 | | |

*- Amphibians.

(1) List does not include one-of-a-kind experimental aircraft.
This accounts for missing numbers in aircraft designations.

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